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DIALECT AND VERNACULAR FEATURES IN LATE MODERN ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE: BEGINNINGS OF A QUEST

Abstract

In this contribution I intend to discuss some important methodological issues concerning the study of so-called 'non-standard' features in Late Modern English (LModE) documents; for instance, among such issues, we can include the place of perceptual dialectology, as labels like prescriptivism and normativity cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the speakers' self-consciousness deriving from the (covert) prestige of certain varieties in relation to others. In addition to addressing some terminological points, I will stress the importance of studying authentic manuscripts, as it is only when we access original texts and manuscripts that we can go beyond the layers of interpretation added by later editors, and perhaps discover new perspectives from details that had been overlooked. The contribution will deal with a range of texts encoded by people of varying education levels, in order to highlight the different methodological problems under discussion; special attention will finally be given to correspondence, on account of its validity as a source of (relatively) spontaneous usage.

Key words

Late Modern English; dialectology; prescriptivism; correspondence; language history from below; Scots; English in Scotland

1. Introduction

This contribution¹ aims to problematize a few methodological issues concerning the study of Late Modern English (LModE) texts; in particular, I intend to focus on supposedly 'non-standard' features, and discuss what approaches and

what documents may provide useful insights into the linguistic traits of relatively spontaneous usage, beyond the norms identified and recommended by grammarians and lexicographers. This research question will be addressed taking into consideration the latest models offered by linguists who stress the usefulness of discussing language history ‘from below’ – that is, giving attention to documents encoded by users of varying (not necessarily high) levels of education, addressed to familiar recipients, and therefore relatively free from the self-consciousness that typically characterizes formal texts. In this respect, the study of diaries and letters promises very interesting results in relation to the occurrence of dialect and vernacular features in grammar and vocabulary.

After an overview of some terminological problems associated with the investigation of these methodological issues, I intend to highlight the importance of studying authentic texts and manuscripts, rather than edited ones, so that the danger of later ‘standardizations’ may be avoided. Examples from a variety of sources will be provided throughout the contribution, but special attention will be given to correspondence, as it is especially in informal, familiar letters, that we can expect usage to reflect best the linguistic competence of both encoders and recipients at the time on which our interest focuses. In fact, letters can be intriguingly contradictory. In familiar letters, like in speech, codes can be mixed for humorous, jocular purposes between friends (shared humour being a very powerful positive politeness move). For instance, in several letters dated between 1880 and 1890, Robert Louis Stevenson and his very close friend Charles Baxter addressed each other in broad Scots, putting on the interchangeable personae of Thomson and Johnson, two “plain, auld ex-elder[s]”, each of whom (in their own words) is “just about as honest as he can weel afford, an’ but for a when auld scandals, near forgotten noo, is a pairfec’ly respectable and thoroughly decent man” (Booth and Mehew 1994–95: Letter 1329). Given the clearly jocular tone of the letters, it could be argued that this kind of usage falls very neatly into the category of fictional registers in which Scots was both permissible and indeed expected when the speakers were elderly, non-mobile, often rural men and women that could be taken to represent a distant, long-past age. However, not all Scots letters of theirs were entirely jocular: in several of them business matters are discussed (see Dossena, in preparation). It is therefore possible that taking uses of Scots in correspondence as a violation of expected norms is a present-day interpretation of nineteenth-century views on sociolinguistic issues. If we wish to investigate actual usage, we can rely on the opinions of contemporary commentators, but their reliability should be tested against usage as observed in documents, since subjective perception may cause to emphasize or understate phenomena, especially when dealing with the usage of different social classes.

In little more than ten years our knowledge of LModE has increased considerably (see, among others, Dossena and Jones 2003, Pérez-Guerra et al. 2007 and Tieken-Boon van Ostade and van der Wurff 2009). However, if we look at the texts that have been taken into consideration, we see that they mostly fall into two categories:

- a. metalinguistic comments on the part of contemporary scholars, as Late Modern times were characterized by the ideology of (self-)improvement, promoted by means of (self-help) guides in the form of countless grammars, dictionaries, elocution lessons, and attempts to simplify spelling; and
- b. literary texts or documents encoded by educated people, often discussed on the basis of critical editions.

It is only in very recent times that new approaches to previously little-studied registers, such as business letters, different types of encoders, such as partly-schooled writers, and different sources, such as unpublished manuscripts, have begun to be taken into consideration, and so far they have been mostly exploratory case studies of relatively small scale. In the rest of my contribution I intend to discuss such new approaches, and highlight their potential for future research, especially as far as supposedly ‘non-standard English’ is concerned.

2. What is non-standard, and where can it be studied?

‘Standard’ and ‘non-standard’ may be useful shorthand labels, but by now they seem somewhat inadequate – studies in Present-Day English find them biased, in relation to both geographical and social distribution. Scholars would agree that greater attention must be given to diatopic and diastratic variation, and traditional approaches to English historical linguistics do acknowledge geographical variation when discussing OE and ME; later periods, however, are often dealt with in a much more encompassing way.

Leaving aside studies of Older Scots up to 1730 and of Celtic Englishes,² written Modern English does not seem to have attracted the same scholarly interest as far as geographical variation is concerned. Similarly, social variation is investigated by means of highly specialized corpora, such as the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC: see www.helsinki.fi/varieng/domains/CEEC.html) and the *Network of Eighteenth-century English Texts* (NEET: see www.shaf.ac.uk/english/staff/research/sfitzmaurice.html), which, however, do not extend to the nineteenth century. The *Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English* (CONCE: see Kytö et al. 2006) and *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (ARCHER: see www.anglistik.unifreiburg.de/institut/ismair/research.html#archer) do, but they focus on English English. For other varieties, the recently launched *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing (1700-1945)* (see www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/cmsw/) and the *Corpus of Historical American English (1810-2000)* (see <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>), are invaluable additions. All these corpora, however, mostly rely on edited texts – a point to which I shall return later.

It is therefore clear that we seem to have been studying a fraction of what was actually written by a fraction of the population, although so many more documents are available in archives and libraries than we have for earlier stages of the

language. It seems almost paradoxical that, the fewer texts we have, the more we know about them. Karina Williamson (2007) has recently drawn attention to the tremendous increase in ‘private writing’ in Late Modern times, but – on account of the literary interest characterizing the collection in which her study appears – ordinary writers are not taken into consideration. However, as Donaldson put it, we need to “look beyond the narrow confines of bourgeois book-culture” (1986: 70).³ Of course the sheer quantity of preserved and inventoried but uninvestigated material poses the problem of corpus representativeness; however, that issue does not stop investigations into PDE, where the material that is potentially available is constantly increasing – in fact, it has brought about the launch of such projects as the Bank of English, which is meant to expand progressively. Large-scale projects, such as the BNC, could be launched for LModE, if adequate time and resources were allocated to them.

As regards scholarly approaches to the language of Late Modern times, it is worth focussing on the nineteenth century; for a long time most manuals assumed that studies in nineteenth-century English had very little, if anything, to offer; the linguist would find it stable, predictable, regular – perhaps more formal than PDE, but that evaluation was part of the ‘complaint tradition’ that had seen language deteriorating for centuries. It was only with Bailey (1996), Görlach (1999) and, more recently, Beal (2004) that the very rich variety of texts available began to be taken into consideration. Even earlier, Donaldson’s (1986 and 1989) studies of the popular press, the diffusion of which was extraordinary, had contributed a new perspective on supposedly non-standard English, which however does not seem to have been taken up to any great extent. Still, that local varieties did exist is actually proven by the same number of grammars, dictionaries, and sundry guides that fascinate so many LModE scholars. It is therefore clear that there is massive scope for the analysis of documents that so far have lain unobserved (unobserved by linguists, at least) in archives and libraries – documents that may show us exactly what it was that these commentators intended to correct, improve or ascertain. In a word, we must try and re-discover dialect and indeed vernacular features in authentic texts, written by ordinary people, alongside and beyond literary fabrications or carefully edited printed documents. This is a view put forward by those scholars who argue in favour of ‘language histories from below’ (cf Elspaß et al. 2007, Fairman 2007), and which has already provided interesting suggestions for studies in a wider European perspective.

3. Varieties and variation

The distinction between dialect and vernacular features concerns terminological issues that are certainly worth discussing. Laing and Lass have recently started one of their studies with a bold statement: “There are no such things as dialects” (2006: 417). This apparently controversial claim is in fact a very good way to problematize a concept that has been among the most persistent ones in both lin-

guistic analysis and in users' perceptions:⁴ the dichotomy between what is 'standard' (i.e., good, commendable, a model for educated and socially aspiring users), and what is 'non-standard' – i.e., only used in certain social circles, with strong age, gender and class bias, to be forgotten and overcome as quickly as possible, though it is the language of the hearth and – in some respects – the 'language of the heart'.

In fact, users command a very broad range of registers and styles, most use both 'standard' and 'non-standard' forms, switching from the ones to the others, and indeed mixing them, according to what is most suitable in their communicative context and for their illocutionary purposes. Within this range, the density of 'standard' forms, or forms that are unmarked from a socio-geo-historical point of view, may vary depending on the level of accuracy encoders are striving to obtain, and how much attention they are actually paying to their own production; in this respect, Lesley Milroy's definition of a vernacular as "a speaker's least overtly careful style" (1987: 12) seems particularly apt. When the social context is such that speakers need not pay extreme attention to their usage, their vernacular may be available for observation; as for writers, the case is somewhat different, as the very act of writing requires greater attention; however, as Tiekens-Boon van Ostade has shown in various studies (e.g., 2003 and 2005), in many eighteenth-century informal letters the language appears to follow rules that are different from and independent of the language of more standard written styles. Indeed, this is in line with Labov's argument, according to which "the vernacular includes inherent variation, but the rules governing that variation appear to be more regular than those operating in the more formal 'superposed' styles that are acquired later in life" (Labov 1981: 3, as quoted by Milroy 1987: 23). Indeed, we may imagine a 'dia-glossic', i.e. continuum-structured, framework (see Auer 2005: 22), in which users go beyond the simpler 'di-glossic' opposition of 'standard' and 'dialect', but display a more complex range of styles and codes, as "a di-glossic repertoire is characterised by intermediate variants between standard and (base) dialect" (Auer 2005: 22). When analyzing texts, we should therefore make important distinctions between what is meant to be for publication, in whatever form, and what is meant to be for a more private readership. Although in the latter type of document dialectal density was mostly avoided, usage is often somewhat divergent from codified models and may follow different rules.

This then raises the question of what sources may count as reliable, in order to identify and study dialect and vernacular features; after an overview of various possibilities, I intend to concentrate on correspondence in the concluding part of my paper, in order to stress a few methodological issues relevant to historical investigations. As it would be well beyond the scope of this study to discuss the British Isles in general, I will focus on the case of Lowland Scotland, as the coexistence of two descendants of OE dialects in one territory in a broad range of both formal and informal registers makes it unique and therefore the internal and external histories of the language are particularly interesting in their complexity.

3.1. *In search of authenticity*

When looking for socio-geo-historical variation in texts, it is an immediate temptation to turn to dialect literature. However, dialect literature may be extremely unreliable from the linguist's point of view, on account of its very 'poetic' qualities: forms may be deliberately exaggerated or be made to seem more frequent than they actually are, for dramatic or stylistic purposes. Authors were known to 'construct' dialect texts so as to suit their own agenda (see McCafferty 2008); dialect forms could be deliberately diluted for editorial reasons, so as to make the text accessible to a wider audience (Donaldson 1986: 146–147), and anyhow printers felt at liberty to 'standardize' whatever was submitted, ironing out spelling or morphological discrepancies in manuscripts, for the sake of uniformity and homogeneity.

Literary texts can thus be studied as 'representations' of usage – much in the same way as frescoes and paintings can provide information on architecture beyond what is found in archaeological excavations. Indeed, in some cases such representations can be quite fine-grained, for instance in the works of Robert Fergusson, but it is not impossible to find candid admissions like in Robert Louis Stevenson's introduction to the Scots poems in *Underwoods* (1886), in which the author's usage is presented as somewhat eclectic:

I simply wrote my Scots as well as I was able, not caring if it hailed from Lauderdale or Angus, from the Mearns or Galloway; if I had ever heard a good word, I used it without shame; and when Scots was lacking, or the rhyme jibbed, I was glad (like my betters) to fall back on English.
(online text at <www.bartelby.com/188/2002.html>)

With these caveats in mind, we can now discuss in greater detail what sources could be investigated, in order to study dialect and vernacular features.

3.1.1. *Representations of spoken language*

As far as the spoken medium is concerned, we know from various sources that in Late Modern times it was not uncommon even for educated speakers to use Scots in both formal and informal registers. It is Stevenson again who models his fearsome judge Weir on Lord Braxfield (said to have spoken Scots also in Court) and has him lecture in Scots to his frail English-speaking son Archie (*Weir of Hermiston*, 1896). An earlier example is in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), in which again father and son do not speak the same language, either literally or figuratively: the father speaks Scots and can see through the English-worded fanaticism of his estranged wife and son.

Moving beyond literary texts, memoirs and anecdotes in journals also present a similar picture: for instance, John Cockburn in 1856 recalled elderly ladies using Scots in definitely polite circles – though the phenomenon was said to be

irretrievably waning (1856/1971: 58–67). On the other hand, such memoirs often include anecdotes in which occasional Scots phrases are used as ‘clinchers’, or as ‘authenticating devices’ capable of summing up a character in a few words, as in (1a) and (1b) below:

- (1a) On one occasion when a belated traveller found him [Alexander Webster, in Edinburgh in 1737] on the street “rather the worse”, and said to him, “What would people say if they saw you, Doctor?” “They wadna believe their ain een!” was the reply. (Lees 1889: 256–257)
- (1b) The Bellman of Kirriemuir read a written Advertisement in the midst of the multitude on a Fair day, as follows: “Notish, all persons driving their cattle through the lands of Logie, to or from market, will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of law.” And immediately added, by way of sedative to the natives, “Ye needna mind a’ this, lads, its only a haver o’ the grieve’s”. (Anon. n.d., Anecdote No. 24, *The Bellman*)

In addition to this, we have numerous comments pointing to what was perhaps the ancestor of Scottish Standard English – see Dossena (2005) and Jones and McLeod (2007): among the earliest, we find Sir Robert Sibbald’s, who distinguished

That Language we call Broad Scots, which is yet used by the Vulgar, [...] the *Highlanders* Language, and the refined Language of the Gentry, which the more Polite People among us do use, and is made up of *Saxon*, *French* and *Latin* Words. (Sibbald 1710: 15–16)

The self-consciousness with which Scottish writers, including highly educated ones, such as David Hume, presented their texts, is well-known. The reference to stylistic imperfections may actually be a *captatio benevolentiae* move at the end of prefaces. Thomas Innes, for instance, based at the Scotch College in Paris, concludes his Preface with the following words:

It remains only now that I beg some allowance from the *English* reader, for the style and expression. [...] And though an honourable gentleman of my own country, and another learned *English* gentleman, were so kind as to revise the language, and to alter such exotic words, or expressions, as it was natural should drop from me; I doubt not but the *English* reader will still meet in this essay, with too many marks of my native language and foreign education. (Innes 1729: l–li)

As a matter of fact, linguistic awareness is often recorded in literary texts, which did not only supply glossaries, but also provided notes. David Landsborough, minister of Stevenston, in 1828 published his poem *Arran* in Edinburgh, and to

the 6 cantos he appended notes, among which at least three are of interest for the different attitudes to language they represent – see (2a), (2b) and (2c) below:

(2a) Notes to Canto II. (p. 146)

Note 3. *The wind with mournful sough, &c.* (p. 32)

Sough, &c. An expressive Scotch word adopted by Wordsworth and Grames.

In this case usage is justified on the basis of literary authority.

(2b) Note 5. *In rushed the howling blast with angry swirl*, (p. 37)

Swirl is a good expressive Scotch word, which I shall reject when I meet with a better English word to supply its place.

This seems to imply that it will be impossible to replace the word with an English one, as no other word is as ‘good and expressive’ – notice the evaluative lexis, expressing appreciation, and the stress on the poetic traits of Scots vocabulary.

(2c) Notes to Canto V. (pp. 160–161)

Note 5.

Save at intervals the heavy clunk, &c. (p. 96)

Lord BYRON uses *clank* in the same sense. I am aware that *clunk* is pure Scotch; but it is preferable to *clank*, which, to our Scottish ears, is expressive of a sharp and often of a ringing sound, like that which iron emits when struck: whereas *clunk* is the hollow sound which water makes under a vessel at sea, or in a jar or pitcher, which is not full. An honest farmer from Kilbirnie, having risked a sea voyage to Arran, had the pleasant variety of a storm as he returned. On reaching Saltcoats, he jumped ashore with great agility, and marched through the town, and never looked behind him till he reached the heights from which you have the last view of the sea. He then ventured to look back on the mighty ocean, and, with a sage nod of his head, said, “Ca’ me a fool, if ever thou play *clunk clunk* at my *lug* again.”⁵

Here rejection of literary authority (*pace* the author’s own fn. 3 above) is justified on the basis of the phonaesthetic quality of the word. In addition, we find the same use of Scots as an authenticating device and as a note of colour as we find in travelogues (Dossena 2005: 119–120).

As for the first reference work on Scots, in John Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808) we also find comments on morphological traits occurring in popular usage – see for instance the entries on I and L in vols. 1 and 2 respectively, in which diminutives are discussed:⁶

Ie, as a termination, is much used, in vulgar language, for forming diminu-

tives; as *bairnie*, a little child, an infant, from *bairn*; *burnie*, from *burn*; *lammie*, from *lamb*, &c. But such diminutives have scarcely any sanction from our old writers. (Jamieson 1808, I, s.v.)

L, in our language, is a letter evidently denoting diminution. In this sense it occurs in the formation of *bagrel* a child; *gangarel*, *gangrel*, a child beginning to walk, *q.* a little *ganger*; *hangrell*, *q.v.* [an implement of the stable where bridles are hung].

Ihre, in order to prove that Gothic⁷ diminutives are formed by this letter, refers to MoesG. *mawilo*, a diminutive from *mawi*, a girl, *barnilo*, a little child, from *barn*; Su.G. *kyckling*, a chicken, *wekling*, an effeminate man. He remarks the affinity of the Lat. in this respect; as, in *puellus*, *cultellus*, &c. In Germ. *l* is also a mark of diminution; as, *maennl*, homuncio, from *man*, homo, *steinl*, lapillus, a little stone, from *stein*, lapis.

(Jamieson 1808, L, s.v.)

Thanks to the antiquarian interest that stressed the greater ‘purity’ of Scots in relation to English (Dossena 2006a), Scots regained some status, so that the influence of Scots on English was not to be quickly overcome, despite strenuous attempts on the part of many to approximate a ‘British’ standard, a label that was not without political overtones (see Dossena 2008a). Indeed, scholars have suggested that a certain idea of ‘Britishness’ actually developed in Scotland (see Manning 2007), giving rise to a Unionist discourse that was to lead to uses of North Britain and – perhaps more rarely – South Britain,⁸ instead of Scotland and England, when addressing correspondence. Moreover, pamphlets could make use of regiolects for argumentative purposes: see Porter (1999), Dossena (2003 and 2009) and Brownlees (2009). In Anon. (1788), *Poetical Dialogues on Religion, in the Scots Dialect, between Two Gentlemen and Two Ploughmen*, the two gentlemen, Theophilus and Hippolitus, use Standard English in Dialogue IV; the two ploughmen, Donald and Dubbin, use (much diluted) Scots in Dialogues I, II and III; the Epilogue that follows is in English – e.g.:

Dubbin: [...]

I hear sad news is gaun about,
And that’s the cause I’m early out.
The King, I thought, had aye some sense,
But now I see it’s a’ pretence.
He leads us know a bonny dance,
Ay! Girds us in a *leg wi’* France:
A pretty packed *category*,
Pope, presbyt’ry, ands purgatory. [...]

Donald: [...]

I’ve heard this news as well as you,

And I am glad to find it true;
 Because my very saul would sing,
 To see Religion form a ring,
 Embrace, in one harmonious kirk,
 Pope, Prelate, Pagan, Jew, and Turk;
 To see your bletherin' bigot band
 Whip't forth from every peaceful land. (Anon. 1788, Epilogue)

Clearly, this may not be quite reliable as a representation of ploughmen's speech; it is in fact closer to the usage of Ramsay's 'Gentle Shepherd' or indeed to what is observed in the numerous moral poems recommending temperance in rather thin Scots (e.g., *Satan's Warehouse Door*: Anon. 1808; and *Scotland's Skaith; or, the Sad Effects of Drunkenness exemplified in the History of Will and Jean*: Anon. 1828).

As for urban working class speech, this is often found in anecdotes concerning chapmen. Among these, William Cameron (Hawkie) was a leading figure in early nineteenth-century Glasgow street culture; his autobiography, published decades after his death, reads like a picaresque novel, and it is an excellent example of just how much may be lost on account of editorial interventions: only in the last paragraphs (italicized here) are we allowed to glimpse what the author's spelling was actually like:

The inmates who are in good health, get about two pints of substantial well-made porridge, of the best grain, with an imperial half-mutchkin of milk for breakfast; [...] *The supper of the inmeats is the same as brakefast – in trwth, the whole stwddies to the utemost the comfort of the inmeats; [...] I consider it prowdent at this time, to end my peregrinations hear.*
 (Strathesk 1888: 112, emphasis added)

In another, earlier case, concerning Dougald Graham, 'skellat bellman' or town crier of Glasgow in the second half of the eighteenth century,⁹ it is the words of the publisher that are reported in the local dialect:

The bookseller and chapbook printer George Caldwell, of Paisley, knew Graham [...] and said of him: 'Dougald was an unco glib body at the pen, and could screed aff a bit penny history in less than nae time. A' his warks took weel – they were level to the meanest capacity, and had plenty of coarse jokes to season them. I never kent a history of Dougald's that stack in the sale yet, and we were aye fain to get a haud of some new piece frae him.'
 (Shepard 1973: 91–92 [no source given])

As for spontaneous speech, courtroom discourse is certainly a good source; however, we cannot exclude editorial interventions in that case either. The people who wrote down Kirk Session minutes, for instance, may have 'translated' what

was ‘said’ into ‘written’ English, except for occasional items that could function as overt markers of authenticity, as in the example given below:

Elizabeth Milligan, servant to Robert Blair at Doura, parish of Kilwinning aged 23 She was Janet Bryan’s cousin. Janet came to her house on Friday the 18 May at 4. She described how she was dressed. She told her that she had turned unwell on the road and showed her the blood on her drawers and stockings. Elizabeth Milligan offered to wash them for her and did so. She told Janet Bryan jokingly that it looked as if she had “a wee ane”, but Janet did not reply yes or no. At 8, Janet said she was going to Loans where Elizabeth Milligan’s father lived. She had not known that Janet was in the family way.

(online text at [http://maybole.org/community/kirkoswald/kirkoswaldkirk-session records.htm#1810](http://maybole.org/community/kirkoswald/kirkoswaldkirk-session%20records.htm#1810))

No attempt appears to have been made to reproduce speech by means of spelling, such as we find in dialect literature. Nonetheless, such documents are invaluable for studies in pragmatics (e.g. Archer 2005) and for studies of earlier stages of specialized discourse.

3.1.2. *Written language*

Referring again to argumentative texts, Donaldson (1986: 35–71) illustrates several instances of texts provided by ‘vernacular correspondents’ in the *People’s Journal* (published in Dundee). Although numerous instances from other papers are provided, in which the comic intent of the authors is obvious,¹⁰ in several cases problems were discussed in Scots by people who were not literary authors of dialect prose.¹¹ Indeed, Scots was employed to discuss politics, industrialization and its consequences, as was the case in the columns of ‘Archie Tait’, i.e. James Leatham, in the *Peterhead Sentinel* (Donaldson 1986: 64–71), or even the issue of voteless women, raised in the *Weekly News* of 13 January 1906 (Donaldson 1989: 183).

As for other newspapers, their use of Scots is reminiscent of what is observed in travelogues, as in interviews language is ‘quoted’ in a well-defined framework. The *New York Times* of 20 September 1902, for instance, in the ‘Books and Men’ section, reports an article from the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* with the title ‘The Secret of Swanston: The Truth about Stevenson’, in which two visitors interview “two natives”; interestingly, one of the latter begins his turn in English, then switches to Scots, then back to English, and finally to Scots again, as if the code-mix was meant to cater for the needs of the listeners, who need to adjust to an unfamiliar variety; the words of the other speaker, instead, appear to show more consistent usage, possibly because the interaction with the visitors is already under way, and no further accommodation to their code is required:

“An American the other day told me he came here first after landing. It’s a’ about that Stevenson an’ his bukes. There’s nothing in them. Noo, there’s Burns, that’s poetry. This wis wark.” “Aye”, chimed in the other man, “Stevenson would dae nothing but lie about the dykes. He would’na wark. He was aye rinning’ about wi’ lang Todd among the hills, getting him to tell a’ the stories he kent”.

(online text at <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9C03EFDE1E30E132A25753C2A96F9C946397D6CF>)

However, such quotations report snatches of conversation in which other subjects are supposed take part, albeit vicariously: these silent participants are the readers of the newspapers, for whose communicative competence the journalists must also account. Studies in the vernacular are probably more fruitful when ‘ego-documents’, such as diaries and letters, are taken into consideration.

3.1.2.1. *Diaries*

Spontaneous uses of vernacular forms in relatively unmonitored texts may be expected to occur in diaries, on account of their characteristic privacy. However, even here we may find documents that were actually meant to be read by third parties, as in the case of emigrants who kept records of their journeys, so that they could then post these diaries back to their families at home; in a diary attributed to Jack Mackay, this intention is stated explicitly; indeed, the recipients are addressed specifically, just like in a letter:

[...] have been busy all day reading Byrons Don Juan + Copying this day Book + putting it into another so that when I send you this I may have a Copy myself [...] Dear freinds it is exactly 3 months this forenoon since I bade you all farewell for a time, hoping in a few years to return + see you all again. ### the scene + sensations of that moment are still prest upon my memory, [...] Both evening + morning Midnight + Midday My hearts with my freinds That are now far away [...] In my busiest moments in my moments of Solitude Company or amusement I remmember you [...] who would I remmember if not kind + affectionate Father + Mother Sisters + Brothers which you have been to me I am well aware you think, I have not acted as such in leaving you, It greives me to the Soul to think that you consider me Selfish. (NLS Acc 6158, entry for 26th July 1852)

Nonetheless, even in such an accurate text, we observe features like the transposition of <ie> and <ei> in *friends* and *grieves*, the reduplication of <m> in *remember*, and the phonetic spelling of *pressed*; all potential tokens of the author’s vernacular usage. In other cases, the diarists were aware of a potential future readership, and indeed they could state their stylistic preoccupations in terms that outline awareness of the Observer’s Paradox very neatly; one of them reveals

his attitude through the modest statement, addressed to the hypothetical ‘Friend’ into whose hands his diary might fall after his death, that “what will follow will be written without regard to order or place [...] neither will any regard be paid to the choice of language or expression.” (Beaton, NLS Acc 6486: 1). As a matter of fact, diaries were often preserved as copies that descendants typed out in later years, so we cannot be sure that dialect and vernacular forms were recorded as in the original; as in the case of medieval manuscripts, the copyists may have ‘translated’ the text into their own variety, or what they assumed to be the model (see Laing 2004). On the other hand, overt uses of Scots in diaries do not seem to differ too considerably from what is found in travelogues, where lexical items are employed as authenticating devices, and in literature. For instance, in the diary written by John Steele “while aboard the ‘Curler’ from Greenoch [sic] to New York Saturday May 24, 1828 to Saturday July 19, 1828”, the only Scots item we come across is a reference to a proverb:

Tuesday, July 1st 10 A.M. Strong breeze, very thick haze, the sails all dripping with water, from condensed mist. Never saw such a thick mist in Scotland, although¹² the common observation of a Scotch mist wetting an Englishman to the skin.¹³ (NLS Acc 5814: 10)

On occasion, diaries may comprise poems written by the emigrants themselves. The following, for instance, is in the diary “of Sea Voyage by Charles McKelvie and his sister, Agnes McKelvie, Natives of Isla near Campeltown, Argyll, Scotland who sailed on 29 August, 1879 from Greenock on S/S Dunedin and arrived at Port Chalmers, New Zealand on or about 4 December, 1879 ([typescript] copy kindly lent by the Irwin families [sic] of Wyndham and District, Southland, New Zealand.):

The Emigrants Complaint on board the Dunedin
Down Bonnie Scotlands’ Bonnie Clyde,
In sunny August evening tide, into the Atlantic deep and wide # away we sail, [...]
Why cannot this ship her equilibrium keep, she rocks when we # wake and she rolls when we sleep,
Those builders of boats may Satan confound, what thing can stand # steady whose bottom is round,
Ere half a week out, most of us are ill, our stomachs were tumms¹⁴ # no diet would fill, [...]
Hark, Hark, to the Concert, the Chorus of weans,
'Tis like coils of wire run throughout my brain,
But bless them and pray that our doctor will save
Our children and bairns from a watery grave, [...]. (NLS Acc 6937)

If we focus on the lexical choices in this text, we notice just very few overt Scotti-

cisms: *bonnie*, *weans* and *bairns*, which – despite the statement that the emigrants came from all over Britain (only Wales is not mentioned, probably subsumed under ‘England’, or to avoid disrupting the rhythmical symmetry of ‘England and Scotland and Ireland’) – makes the authorship of the poem distinctively Scottish; however, it is the kind of tokens that are practically frozen in their status of dialect markers, nor do they seem to fulfil any other function.¹⁵

On the other hand, such uses illustrate the range of styles that may be observed in diaries; of course the level of schooling varied, and – like in other travelogues – we may come across cases in which the words of other passengers are reported as authenticating devices. This may be the case when the diary was published in local newspapers because it included advice to prospective emigrants, in addition to descriptions of the voyage and of the new surroundings, with detailed information about prices and wages. Margaret Hinshelwood’s diary of her journey to Queensland (1883: 8–9), for instance, was published in the *Jedburgh Gazette* (22 December 1883, 29 December 1883 and 5 January 1884); it includes just one occurrence of ‘auld Scotland’ towards the end of the diary, when – upon arrival – a moment of homesickness is perceived, and before the (tartan-tinged) welcome of the local Caledonian Society. On the other hand, towards the beginning of the voyage, the diarist says:

I heard a Hawick lady remark she never saw sae money drunk folk a’ her life, the vera bairns werna sober. (NLS Acc 12149)

Here the vernacular form is observed not just in the lexical choices, but also in the negative forms, both of which follow Scots syntax: the diarist seems to have recorded the phrase both accurately and competently.¹⁶

3.1.2.2. *Letters*

The range of styles observed in diaries indicates the complexity of this text type, which is far from monolithic, but accounts for various levels of education, attention for the hypothetical reader, and personal, sometimes vernacular, style. The same may apply to correspondence, in which relatively ‘off-guard’ language may be traced; this may be especially true of long letters, as self-consciousness might decrease as the letter lengthens and the encoder becomes more spontaneous.

Letters are in fact a very rich and multi-faceted text type. When we study them we should (ideally) take into consideration a broad range of variables (such as age, gender, provenance, social class and level of schooling) for both encoder and recipient.¹⁷ However, these details are not always readily available: in fact, in the case of working-class encoders it may be impossible to retrieve more information than what can be gleaned from internal evidence. In addition, the place of encoding may not coincide with the encoder’s place of provenance: for instance, emigrants from the north or the east might write home before sailing from Glasgow or Liverpool. Nor is the actual writer always the encoder, as amanuenses could

be employed by poorly literate people, or – at the opposite end of the social cline – the upper classes and businessmen could dictate to secretaries. When business letters are taken into consideration, the complexity increases, because the relationship between participants may be less straightforward than in familiar letters; in these, the correspondents may be more or less distant (whether psychologically or geographically), but their mutual status is stable; in business letters, instead, mutual status may be seen to fluctuate, depending on the level of authority that participants wish to grant each other, so we may have fairly high-status encoders, such as bankers, displaying modesty and indirectness when addressing a client, or being authoritative and bold on record when addressing an agent (see Dossena 2006b). All these factors contribute quite dramatically to ‘the text’, no matter how short and concise or extensive and lengthy this may be.

When producing such texts (if we exclude jocular instances, such as the Thompson-Johnson ones exchanged between Stevenson and Baxter, mentioned at the beginning of this contribution) all encoders, even the least schooled ones, normally attempted to imitate ‘standard’ models, especially at the beginning and at the end of the letter (see van der Wal 2007 and Dossena 2008b).¹⁸ Within the body of the letter, however, not everybody managed to follow codified rules. In this case it could be argued that the encoders’ level of schooling was insufficient to ensure that the letters would be ‘in good English’ throughout. But if we look at letters from the point of view of the recipients, i.e. of those for the benefit of whom uses were (more or less self-consciously) selected, we may wonder if they were aware of any discrepancy between the model and the actual text, or whether we are again superimposing our present-day views and interpretations. It is very likely that the level of schooling of both encoders and recipients was similar, so it would have been difficult for the latter to realize what was ‘wrong’ – in fact, the letter may have sounded quite ‘elegant’ in its attempt to imitate fully-schooled models, and also, at the same time, kindly warm in its use of local, familiar forms. This gives rise to a new problem: is it still possible to discuss these uses in terms of divergence from the standard? Or should they not be discussed in a different perspective, as instances of vernacular usage? Nor should these considerations be restricted to emigrants’ correspondence: in the Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence (19CSC, see Dossena 2004 and Dury 2006),¹⁹ for instance, there are encoders of varying levels of education in all branches of the corpus: in familiar letters, in business ones, and in emigrants’ correspondence, though for this so far we have only the letters sent to Scotland, not those received from it.

Models of formality and ‘proper’ usage were provided by letter-writing manuals (a very successful genre in Late Modern times: see Fens-de Zeeuw 2008), by epistolary novels, and by the letters inserted as documentary evidence in broadsides. Although these were presented as authentic, they were actually encoded by the authors, sometimes using exactly the same model for moral teaching when similar cases were reported. In the examples below, two broadsides report the tragic deaths of two young women in two different places; although one event

is said to have occurred in Dundee in 1823 and the other in Kincardine in 1825, the news stories and the letters are identical, in perfectly schooled, even literary English, probably beyond the writing skills of the people who are said to have written them, even when in possession of a letter-writing manual.

FATAL LOVE! WARNING TO LOVERS.

A Full and Authentic ACCOUNT of a most Melancholy and Extraordinary occurrence of FATAL LOVE, which took place at Kincardine, on Thursday last; together with a COPY of the Very affecting LETTER, which was found in the young Woman's bosom after she was cut down, and which fully explains the cause of her committing this rash and fatal act

On Thursday last, Miss M'C-----n, daughter of a respectable gentleman in Kincardine, was found suspended from the ceiling of her own room. [...] The following beautiful and interesting lines was found in her bosom next morning, after she was cut down :....

“Dear CAPTAIN,....If my exhausted spirits would support my trembling hand, whilst I write a few lines to ease a broken heart, it would be the last office I would require them to do. Then may they leave me: then may I find in my grave a retreat from the scorn of men. How is my gold become dim, and my most fine gold become brass. I do not now command you by the awful name of virtue to accuse you of the basest ingratitude, ah no, the scene is entirely changed; you have robbed me, cruelly robbed me of the brightest gem in the female character, and I come as an humble supplicant. [...]
(www.nls.uk/broadsides/broadside.cfm/id/14562)

DISAPPOINTED LOVE

A true account of a young Lady, a Gentleman's Daughter, who Hanged herself in her own bedroom at Dundee, on Monday last, 28th July 1823, for the love she bore to a Captain in the Navy who deserted her, with a beautiful and affecting letter which she Wrote to him the night before she did the deed.

On the 28th of July Miss H-----n daughter of a respectable Gentleman in this place, was found suspended from the ceiling of her room. [...] She sent him the following beautiful and affecting letter the night before the sad event.

“Dear Captain, — If my exhausted spirits would support my trembling hand, whilst I write a few lines to ease a broken heart, it would be the last office I should require them to do. Then may they leave me ; then may I find in the grave a retreat from the scorn of men. How is my gold become dim, and my most fine gold become dross. I do not now command you by the awful name of virtue, to accuse you of the basest ingratitude ; ah, no ! the scene is entirely changed : you have robbed me—Cruelly robbed me of the brightest gem in the female's character, and I come as an humble supplicant; [...]
(www.nls.uk/broadsides/broadside.cfm/id/15356)

When partly-schooled encoders attempted to achieve formality, however, a different text was produced; examples (3a) and (3b) below, both from 19CSC, were written by two men seeking jobs, hence writing to people whose social status was deemed to be superior, and therefore commanded greater deference:

(3a) Sir, # Being told you were chosen one of # the Officers for [...] and # knowing you to take an interest in musical # matters, I have taken the liberty of soliciting your interest to procure for me the appoint- # ment of Band Master, [...] A note # from you to any of the Committee will ### greatly oblige # Your Obed^t Ser^t # [...]

(3b) Dear Sir # You was # so kind as offer to get me # a Schedule for Painting Work # for [...] as this # is the last day for applying # I will take it kind if you will # Secure me ane # and oblige # your ob^t s^t # [...]

In both cases the voice of the encoder is distinctly audible in its directness; syntax is not particularly sophisticated, and in one case we actually observe the prevalent sixteenth-seventeenth-century and widespread dialect form ‘you was’, together with the Scots spelling of <one>.

At other times it is possible to see that the encoder was asking someone else to write on their behalf, but the voice was their own: in the letter below, dated 22 May 1800, a woman has an attorney to the law write to the artillery officer in charge of the company where her husband is serving because she has not heard from him since the previous October, nor has she received any financial support, despite previous enquiries and promises to that effect:

Since the receipt of your Letter, not # a Syllable has been received from him

It is the kind of emphatic statement that is hardly likely to occur in a formal letter, and indeed in the postscript attached to the letter by a member of the local upper class who is acquainted with the situation, we find a more formal endorsement of the lady’s request to put pressure on her husband. The case is described as a “just representation”, i.e. with an adjective that stresses the objective legitimacy of the request.

In another case, dated 1841, a man writes (or perhaps has the minister write) to a Scottish baronet in London in order to apply for a job as a mail guard; what is worth noting here is the way in which negative politeness moves appear to be idiosyncratically numerous:

Honorable Sir # Trusting to your goodne]s in Executing²⁰ the # freedom I have used in addre]sing you; + I beg leave to # state, that I have been advised to apply to you, to obtain # me an appointment as a Mail Guard _ [...]. # If it is not too much trouble to you _ or that # you do not consider my presumption too great _ I shall # feel very grateful for your interest in my behalf. # I have the honor to be # Honorable Sir # your most obedient # humble Servant # [...]

Studies of the vernacular may therefore go beyond grammar and vocabulary, and focus on pragmatics, as in such texts moves do not necessarily follow the same patterns as we observe in more highly codified ones. In these cases the social roles of the participants are observed to play a very important part, and while it may not be possible to rely on external sources, such as dictionaries of biography, to reconstruct exactly what kind of relationship existed between encoders and recipients, it may be possible to extract from the corpus the moves that signify greater or lesser distance, and compare them with the models of politeness that were presented in manuals. In the case of Hawkie, for instance (see Section 3.1.1 above), the letters appended to his autobiography seem to indicate a fairly informal way of addressing his bookseller in Glasgow, Mr David Robertson:

Respected Sir,

In order to prevent defrawd, I send you thes lines steating a most lam-entable teal and sorrey to add too trew – I am out of tobaco, has no mon-ey, creadet crackt, and accounts due that makes me keep under cover; [...] I do not expect a sealebele news peapre, but be so kind as send me an old wan of some kind.

No more, But remains, Sir, unfortenat Hawkie. (Strathesk 1888: 116)

Investigations of spelling and punctuation may be equally promising; for instance, it could be of some interest to see what rules, if any, allowed words to be linked, or when full stops replaced dashes at the end of a sentence, when it became inappropriate to replace <and> with <+>, or when ornamental letters could be used instead of more ordinary ones in the same text (see Dury 2006 and 2008).

Studying language history ‘from below’ on the basis of the very genres that saw a tremendous increase²¹ in the past two centuries may be very fruitful: in particular, it may be worth investigating correspondence in a broader context, considering various types of letters and indeed other genres written by the same kind of users. In addition to the letters encoded by literary figures who could use language very skilfully and in a highly creative way, to the point they could write dialect (whereas actual dialect speakers could not, at least not as accurately and consistently) as if it was another product of their genius, ordinary people’s letters display a more varied cline along which the approximation of supraregional forms is achieved.

4. Concluding remarks

A final comment that may encompass all considerations on the analysis of documents in search of vernacular forms concerns the central role played by encoders, recipients, and the dynamics of their interactions. Discussing such issues as pre-scriptivism and prestige involves awareness of the participants’ greater or lesser self-consciousness, spontaneity, directness or indirectness; as a result, perceptual dialectology must be given greater attention than it seems to have had so far. This also means there is a clear need for more integration with the work of historians, especially as far as education and working relations are concerned, as these had an obvious impact on the kind of texts that could be produced. We are only just beginning to write the history of specialized registers like official and business correspondence: while studies of the former can stretch back for centuries, the latter, like scientific discourse, may be seen to have typically been a function of the thought styles of the time (see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2006). At the time of the Industrial Revolution, of the rise of capitalism in the modern sense of the word, and of important changes in society, brought about by the development of a global empire on the one hand, and the spread of suffrage on the other, business letters

become very valuable witnesses of expected behaviour in both language and in business conduct.

Finally, it may be useful to assess such phenomena in a wider cross-linguistic and European perspective. As Auer (2005: 24) points out, Scotland is not unique in its diaglossic situation, and comparing texts may lead to fruitful results; in the case of English, the study of early stages of ‘colonial varieties’ may also profit from such an approach (see Dollinger 2008).

Given the complexity and diversity of the sheer quantity of material than can be investigated, the aim to analyze socially-situated language use at the intersection of time, space, genres and registers simultaneously might seem a daunting task, but, with the right equipment, it might prove a thoroughly worthwhile and certainly innovative experience.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented as a plenary paper at the 15th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL 15), held in Munich (24–30 August 2008).

² See, respectively, <www.helsinki.fi/varieng/csc/> and <www.joensuu.fi/fld/ecc/index.html> and <www.joensuu.fi/fld/unicont/>.

³ The great interest of Late Modern journalism is also highlighted by Harris (2007).

⁴ As a matter of fact, they go on to say that “‘a dialect’ does not exist as a discrete entity” (Laing and Lass 2006: 417).

⁵ The same anecdote is given with a later source in the *Scots Language Dictionary*: see <www.dsl.ac.uk>, CLUNK, n., s.v..

⁶ Already in 1771 the three-volume *Encyclopedia Britannica* commented on MOE OF MO VS MAIR (the former never denoting quantity or quality, the latter never denoting number) and THIR, the plural of THIS in Scots – see Sorensen (2003: 121–122).

⁷ References to Gothic are frequent, on account of Jamieson’s views on the origin of Scots (see Dossena 2006a).

⁸ So far this form has been recorded just once in the 19CSC files. North Britain, however, was not universally adopted – in fact, Robert Louis Stevenson rejected it very forcefully, as in the letter kindly drawn to my attention by Richard Dury:

“Don’t put ‘N.B.’ [North Britain] on your paper: put Scotland, and be done with it. Alas, that I should be thus stabbed in the home of my friends! The name of my native land is not North Britain, whatever may be the name of yours.” (RLS to S. R. Crockett, c. 10 April 1888, Booth and Mehew 1994–95, 6: 156).

⁹ “Graham was born in a Stirling village about the year 1724, [was out in the ’45 then] published a rhymed *History of the Rebellion*” (Shepard 1973: 91).

¹⁰ James (1976 [1978]: 22–23) discusses the popular press in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, but only mentions dialect in relation to humorous usage, such as in John Collier’s *A View of the Lancashire Dialect* (1746) or in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers* (1837).

¹¹ Donaldson (1986: 56) states: “In the mid 1870s there was a lengthy dispute in the Anstruther-based East Fife Record about the financial obligations of the school board at Crail. As usual, most of the correspondents used pseudonyms but it is clear that one of the contributors was the Provost of Crail himself.”

¹² We may also observe the use of *although* instead of *despite*, as if the verb had been accidentally omitted.

- ¹³ The proverbial saying is “A Scotch mist will wet an Englishman to the skin” – see Grose (1811, s.v. *mist*)
- ¹⁴ Cf. “*Toom*, a place into which rubbish is emptied” (Jamieson 1808), quoted in OED.
- ¹⁵ To this we may add that the McKelvies (if they did co-author the poem) were probably native Gaelic speakers writing English as a second language, so their use of Scots would be very rare.
- ¹⁶ The NLS hosts a large collection of letters, journals, guides etc concerning Scots abroad (see <www.nls.uk/catalogues/online/scotsabroad/index.html>); however, it would be useful to have an archive of diaries and autobiographies of the kind existing in Italy, France, Spain, Finland, Germany and Belgium (see <www.archiviodiari.it/>).
- ¹⁷ *Recipient* is deemed to be a better term than *addressee*, as it is well-known that letters could be circulated to other readers than the person to whom the letter was actually addressed.
- ¹⁸ In a crosslinguistic perspective, comparisons may also be made with a corpus of German emigrants’ letters collected at the JFK-Institut Berlin (www.auswandererbriefe.de/); see Elspaß (2002).
- ¹⁹ I gratefully acknowledge permission to quote from MSS held in the National Library of Scotland, Glasgow University Archives, and the Bank of Scotland Archives; such permission does not extend to third parties, so the quotations presented in this paper should not be used elsewhere. I am also indebted to Richard Dury for his help in the design and compilation of 19CSC, and for valuable comments throughout the investigation process. In all quotations word, line and page breaks are omitted, except where it is deemed important to retain them; in such cases the symbols are <->, <#> and <###> respectively. Spelling is retained as in the original, including linked-up words. The names of the people mentioned in the letters may be replaced by [...] for reasons of privacy; for the same reason, names are replaced with qualifications where sources and dates are provided. At the moment 19CSC comprises a total of nearly 400 letters, for a total of ca. 100,000 orthographic units.
- ²⁰ Interestingly, the word appears to have been corrected so that <†> looks like elongated <s>; the word that was meant was of course <excusing>.
- ²¹ In the case of Scotland this was also due to an increase in the spread of writing skills. If before practically everybody could read but only a smaller percentage could write, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this percentage rose considerably (see Law 1983 and Smout 2007).

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