

From spoken utterance to written transcript
The textual process of court records in Early Modern Sweden

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In the Nordic countries, as in many other parts of Europe, municipal courts experienced a vast increase in the production and use of administrative and juridical records during the Early Modern period. Among other external factors, in Sweden, this intensification can be linked to the steadily increasing use since the fourteenth century of the vernacular as the written language in legal contexts. With the establishment of the Svea Court of Appeal (1614), it was decided that all lower courts in Sweden would send their records there. In consequence, scribes, in addition to writing a draft and a transcript, had to formulate yet another version of the court record for the higher court. This led to a three-phase writing process: three versions of the court record were created, each one written at different times with a somewhat different purpose and with different requirements in terms of content and linguistic style, but all of them legally valid. Empirical comparisons show there may be vast differences between the first draft and the edited transcription, both in style and content, with the second text a modified version, with greater use of legal linguistic markers. Anyone studying these historical texts needs to know where they fit into the cycle and in what circumstances they were produced.

The aim of this poster presentation is to discuss empirical and theoretical aspects of the textual process of court records in Early Modern Sweden. Drawing on social semiotics, we focus on court records in terms of ‘social practice’ (van Leeuwen 2008), making use of theoretical concepts such as ‘intertextuality’ (Bakhtin 1986), ‘recontextualisation’ (Linell 1998) and ‘entextualisation’ (Park and Bucholtz 2009). We will present a theoretical model that captures the text-making process from spoken utterance in court to written legal document. In addition, we will examine the question of written discourse as verbatim, proposing a functional stance, where the scribes’ use of reported speech must be seen as a process of recontextualisation of the speakers’ utterance into an institutionally relevant written account.

The presentation is given as part of the multidisciplinary research project *Town scribes in the kingdom of Sweden in the Early Modern period (1614–1714): Their profession, agency and use of language*, financed by the Kone Foundation (2020–2024). The project focuses on the period from the foundation of the Svea Court of Appeal in Stockholm (1614) to the Great Northern War (1714) from the point of view of historical linguistics and history. The focus in the presentation is the people who drew up the magistrate’s court records, a most important source for historians of Sweden and Finland. The century was an important period in the history of Swedish and Swedish state-building. The growing superpower needed a language and scribes; the vernacular enabled more complex government. In our study, the magistrate’s court records are being utilised for the first time from an interdisciplinary perspective by bringing together theoretical and methodological expertise in historical linguistics and history. The project has three major goals: 1) a prosopographic scribe database, containing information on the social and professional backgrounds and lifetime of the scribes, 2) analysis of town scribes as professionals and language experts, developers of language and producers of texts, and 3) case studies on town scribes as government servants and private citizens in their local community. The result will be an overall picture of professional town scribes as the most pivotal, but often invisible, agents in history: as experts in language and recorders of the past.

Keywords: town scribes, court records, textual process, social semiotics, Early Modern Sweden

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