

Intra-Individual Variation in Synthetic and Analytic Comparative Adjectives from a Socio-Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Style has long been considered as a crucial factor for the understanding of language in society as well as for the social meaning of speakers' sociolinguistic behaviour in interpersonal communication. Given the particular central position that style enjoys in the correlation of diaphasic, linguistic and social elements, intra-speaker variation is clearly seen as inherent to sociolinguistic studies. When investigated in the field of Historical Sociolinguistics, the exploration of intra-speaker variation provides us with the opportunity for reconstructing the sociolinguistic contexts and direction of language changes as well as socially-based variation patterns in remote speech communities.

Recently, new studies on Historical Sociolinguistics are approaching language variation and change from a microscopic perspective by analysing the sociolinguistic behaviour of individual speakers microscopically (Auer 2015; Conde-Silvestre 2016; Schiegg 2016; Hernández-Campoy & García-Vidal 2018a, 2018b; Voeste 2018; Havinga 2021). This certainly constitutes a shift from the traditional sociolinguistic study of collectivity and inter-speaker variation to that of individuality and intra-speaker variation.

The aim of this paper is to show results and conclusions on the investigation of socially-based patterns of style-shifting at the individual level in private correspondence from 15th to 18th century England. For this study, the data has been gathered from the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* and the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension*, which contain useful metadata on the addressers and addressees. To account for speakers' sociolinguistic behaviour in interpersonal communication, this paper addresses intra-writer variation through the application of the Audience Design model proposed by Bell (1984) in letters written by members ascribed to certain social groups when addressing recipients from different social orders. The study is carried out through the analysis of the behaviour of synthetic and analytic comparative adjectives focusing mainly on syllable-length and etymology of the adjectives when analysed. On the basis of quantitative and qualitative analysis, results show variability in the use of the synthetic vs. the analytic comparative linguistic form when addressing different social-ranked recipients exhibiting upward and downward accommodation patterns. In this way, the informants show addressee-based accommodative patterns when writing upwards by showing a preference of the analytic form with long and Romance adjectives (e.g.: *more substanciall*, *more vexatious*), and of the inflectional form with short and Germanic/native adjectives (e.g.: *happier*, *saddere*) when writing downwards. In this line, this study contributes to account for the social meaning of *inter*- and *intra*- speaker variation in the sociolinguistic behaviour of speakers as a linguistic resource for identity construction in interpersonal communication.

Keywords: adjective comparison, historical correspondence, historical sociolinguistics, intra-speaker variation, style-shifting.

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