Sounds, spelling and printing: the case of vowel markers in Early Modern English (1500–1700)

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During the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a number of spelling solutions gradually became established in English as ways to indicate vowel *quality*, namely whether a vowel sound was different from another, and vowel *quantity*, that is to say whether a vowel was long or short. Among the solutions that arose to indicate vowel quality, <ea> and <oa> were introduced for spellings like *sea* and *boat* (see e.g. Scragg, 1974: 48–49; Brengelman, 1980: 338; Görlach, 1991: 46–47; Salmon, 1999: 27–28). For vowel quantity, 'single' consonants in pairs like <g> and <dg>, <ch> and <tch>, as well as <k> and <ck> began to be used for immediately preceding long vowels (see e.g. Blake, 1965: 68–69; Brengelman, 1980: 349; Upward & Davidson, 2011: 179–190). My contribution explores all of the examples of vowel diacritic spelling mentioned above in printed English between 1500 and 1700, using a quantitative model for the analysis of patterns across a range of texts from *Early English Books Online* (also explored in Condorelli, 2020a, 2020b). The analysis shows an overall process of standardisation occurring between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and provides fresh insights into the lexical distribution for the standardisation of vowel diacritic spelling. The discussion reflects upon the development of the spellings, and argues for pragmatic factors within the Early Modern English printing industry as responsible for their modern standardisation.

References

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