

# **An introduction to the varieties of English**

## **Li 4 History & Varieties of English**

### **Lent 2021 Week 1**

Deepthi Gopal ([dg537@cam.ac.uk](mailto:dg537@cam.ac.uk))

# Li 4 Varieties

- **Last term:** a lot of history ...
  - What do linguists do in order to infer past stages of a language? How do we know what English is related to or what it used to look like?
  - How do we talk about changes which have taken place in the structure of English? Why does change happen? (Internal motivations, like 'simplification' or 'symmetry'? External motivations, like contact with Old Norse?)
- **This term:** 'varieties' ...
  - Do the differences between different varieties of English **tell us something about actual structure (i. e. the linguistic system)** or are they superficial and arbitrary? (Do we all have the same basic **grammar**?)
  - Does **the history of the language** tell us anything about **current variation**?
  - What are the **dimensions of variation**? Geography, age, class ... How **informative** are they?
  - **What's changing right now?** How do we substantiate that? Does it give us predictions about the future?
    - All leading into the kind of technical understanding of language change that you will want in papers like Li 11.

# Li 4 Varieties

- **Schedule of lectures:**

- Introduction to Varieties & standardisation (this week) DG
- Phonology 1 (week 2) DG
- Phonology 2 (week 3) DG
- Morphosyntax 1 (week 4) MT
- Morphosyntax 2 (week 5) MT
- Language contact (week 6) MT
- Dialect contact (week 7) DG
- English-based pidgins and creoles (week 8) MT
- Revision

# From ‘history’ to ‘varieties’

- Where did we leave off last term? The period 1500 – 1800 covers the end of Middle English, what is generally called Early Modern English, and the transition into the early stages of a recognisably ‘modern’ (though old-fashioned) English.
- At the beginning of this period, the language looks more ‘Middle’ than ‘Modern’, and sounds somewhere in between both; by the end of this period, the language both looks and sounds quite modern.

## **Letter of Sir Thomas Wyatt to his son, 1532**

I doubt not but long ere this tyme my lettres are come to you. I remember I wrate you in them that if you read them oftin it should be as tho I had written oftin to you: for al that I can not so content me but stil to cal apon you with my lettres. I wold not for al that that if any thing be wel warnid in the other, that you should leaue to remember it becaus of this new, for it is not like with aduertisements as it is with apparel that with long wering a man castith away when he hath new. Honest teching neuir were onles they were out of his remembrans that shold kepe and folow them to the shame and hurt of him self.

## **Letter of Samuel Johnson to James Boswell, 1774**

I am ashamed to think that since I received your letter I have passed so many days without answering it. I think there is no great difficulty in resolving your doubts. The reasons for which you are inclined to visit London, are, I think, not of sufficient strength to answer the objections. I need not tell you what regard you owe to Mrs. Boswell’s entreaties; or how much you ought to study the happiness of her who studies yours with so much diligence, and of whose kindness you enjoy such good effects. Life cannot subsist in society but by reciprocal concessions. She permitted you to ramble last year, you must permit her now to keep you at home.

# From ‘history’ to ‘varieties’

- What’s changed from Wyatt to Johnson?
- Syntax; morphology (Wyatt has past *wrate* for mod. *wrote*; 3SG *castith*, *hath* vs. *studies*; Wyatt would have had *thou* as an option, though uses *you* here; ‘will’/‘would’ is a full verb); orthography.
- Some major phonological changes that we can guess would hold for these individuals.

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Middle English /ɑ/:

Wyatt [ɑ] *that, castith*  
Johnson [æ] *that*  
Johnson [ɑ:] *last, passed.*

Middle English /u/:

Wyatt [u] *but, come*  
Johnson [ʊ] *good*  
Johnson [ʌ] *but, much, subsist.*

Middle English /r/:

Wyatt: full consonantal r in all positions.  
Johnson: only before vowels.

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# From 'history' to 'varieties' (and back again)

- And if we take Chaucer as an example of late Middle English, we can draw the (phonological) path from late ME, through EModE, to essentially-modern English:

CHAUCER	WYATT	JOHNSON	eg.
i	i	I	this
e	ɛ	ɛ	letters ( <i>lettres</i> )
o	ɔ	ɒ	not
iː	ɛi	ʌi	I, time, kindness
u	ɔu	ʌu	now
aː	aː	eː	shame
a	a	æ	that
a	a	aː	last
u	u	ʌ	but
u	u	ʊ	full

- But probably not the whole story.
  - What is the relationship between their written English and the spoken varieties that we expect Johnson and Wyatt to have had?
  - Does every modern speaker of English sound more like Johnson than like Wyatt? For every (vowel; consonant; contrast; morphological feature; syntactic feature)?
  - Why are we so convinced that (Chaucer's English,) Wyatt's English and Johnson's English are different stages in the history of the 'same thing'?

# Standardisation

- Much of the answer to all these questions is the question of **varieties** and their **geographical provenance**, which we'll return to later in this lecture and in the following weeks.
- But one component of the answer to the first and last questions is **standardisation**: what unites Wyatt and Johnson is the fact that they were both writing in a **standardised written variety of English** correspondent to their period and region.
  - Of course, it also helps that they were writing for the same purpose, and in the same 'register'; with similar levels of education (Wyatt was at Cambridge; Johnson at Oxford); ...
  - Where did the standard English (of England) come from? How did it get that way?

# Varieties and standards: Old English

- Going back in time again: when we've talked about **Old English**, we've been talking about texts from roughly the **7th to 11th** centuries, across all of modern England.
- This is very heterogeneous material; we generally divide these texts into four main dialectal groups, corresponding to individual Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: **Mercian**, **Northumbrian**, **Kentish**, and **West Saxon**.
  - Which do correspond to regional **norms**; generally associated with local scribal traditions.
  - Over the course of the OE period, the **West Saxon** dialect is the dominant written/literary standard, even outside its native region ...
    - ... but this tradition was interrupted by the Norman Conquest, when 'high' functions (law, religion, education, literature) were taken over by French.



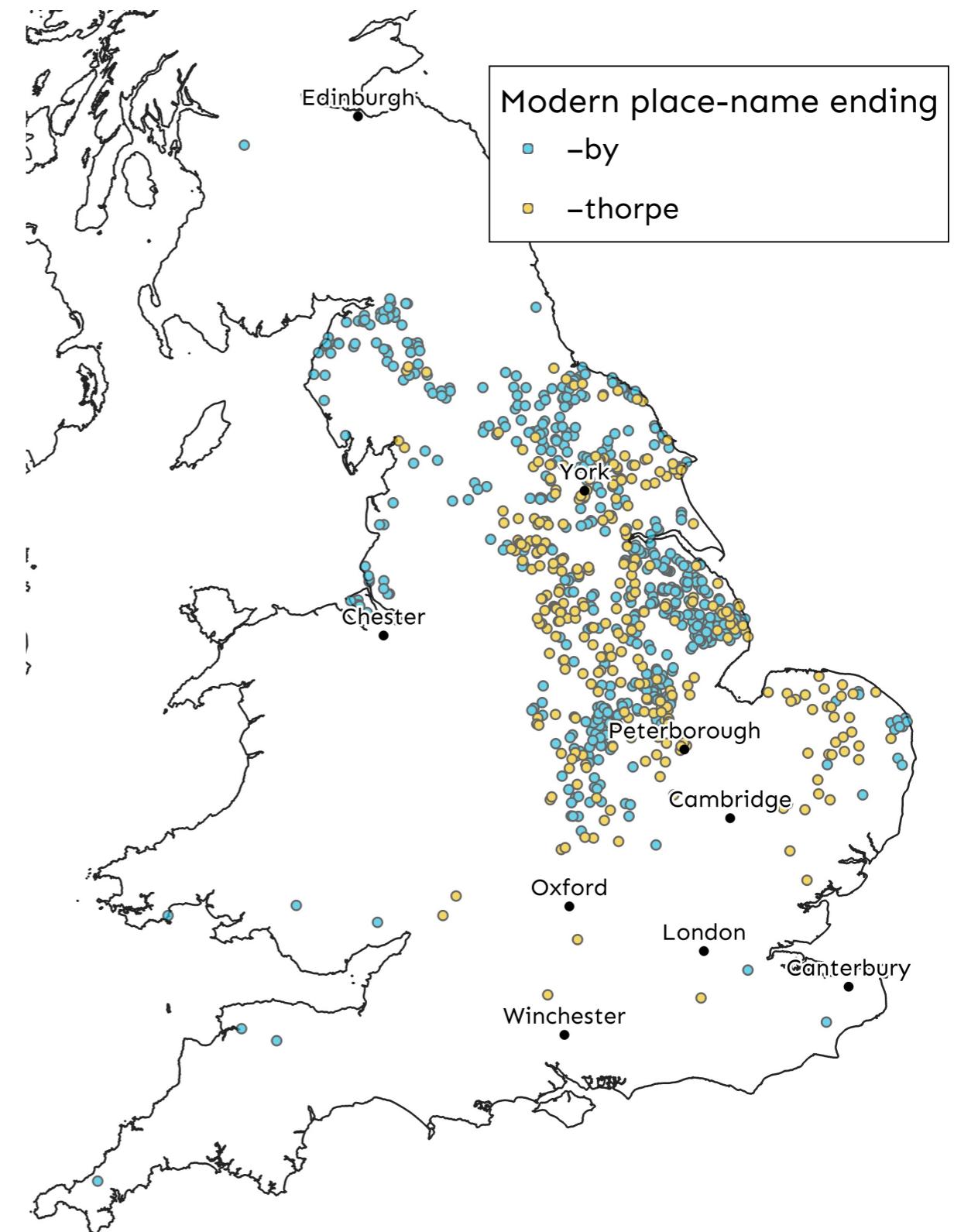
# Varieties and standards: Old English

- **The Danelaw:** one major locus of **variation (Norse influence)** in later Old English. Norse speakers settled in this region from about **865 to 955**; Norse probably persisted as a spoken language for a couple of generations more.
- As you may recall from Michaelmas lecture 8: Norsified English arose in the East Midlands, features spread outward (especially northward).
- Heavy lexical influence, some of which persists in regional variation today.

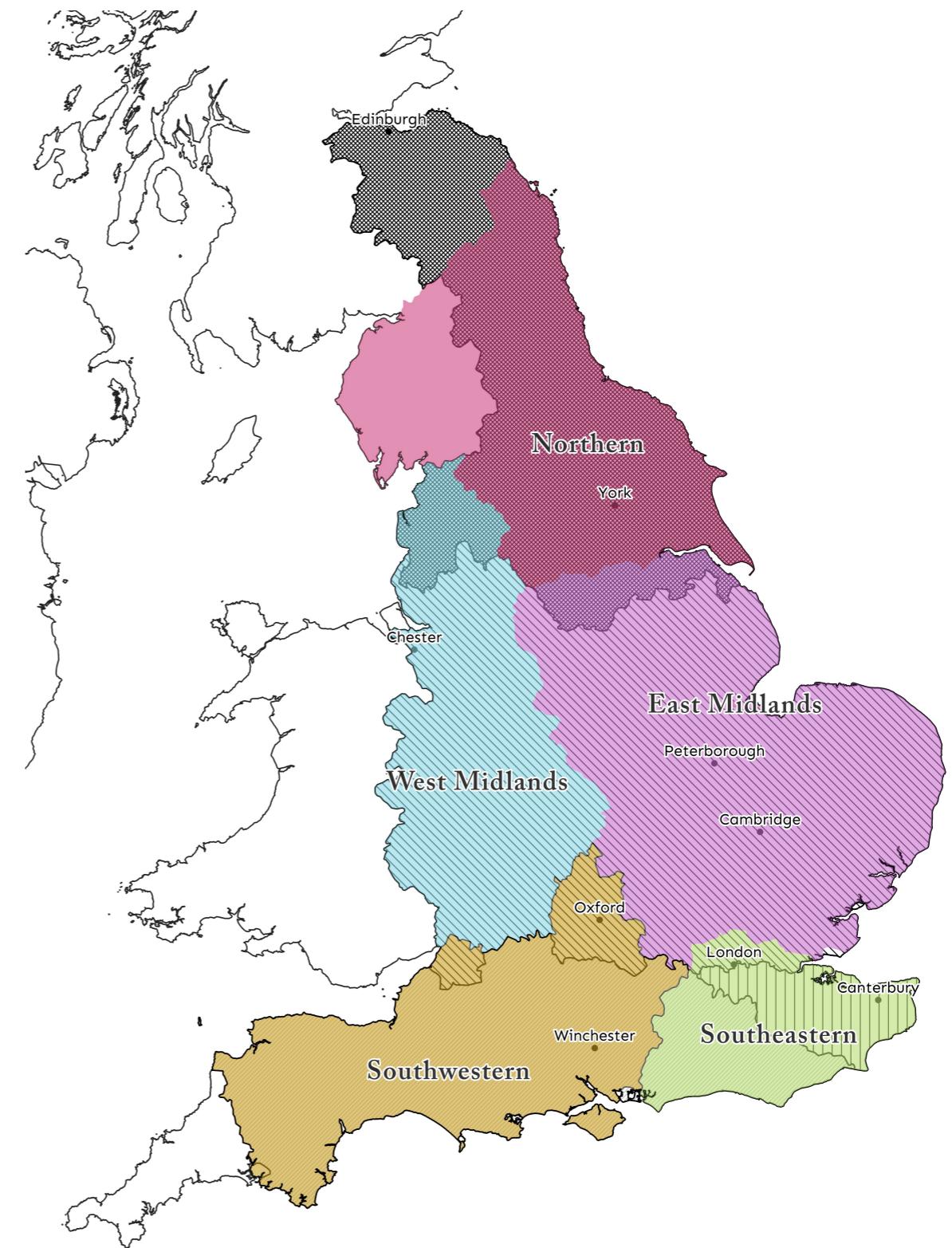


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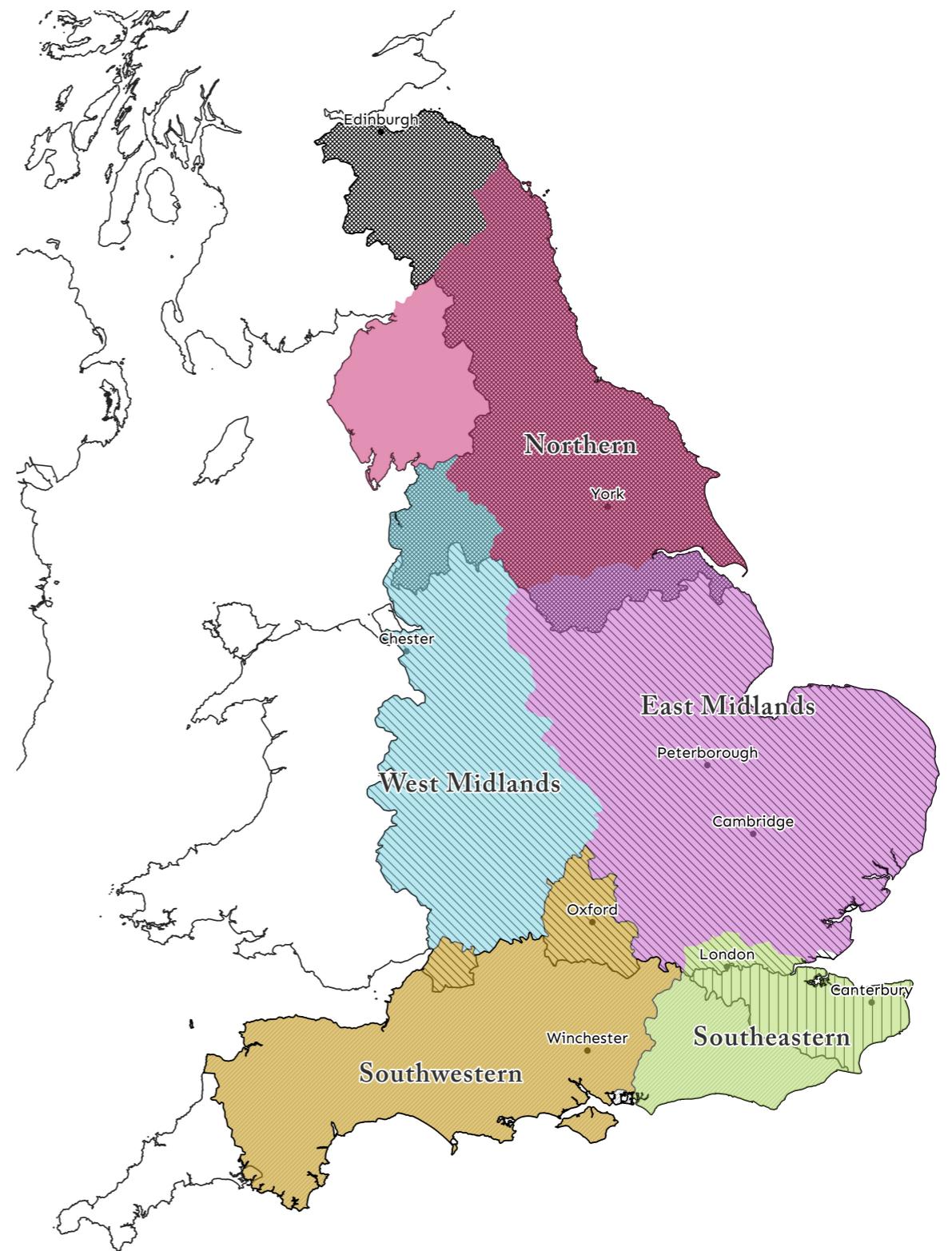


# Varieties and standards: Middle English



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- Middle English is the most diverse period in written English — OE is dominated by West Saxon; later variation is heavily limited by the rise of a dominant standard.
  - **Southeastern** < OE Kentish
  - **Southwestern** < OE West Saxon = south, except Kent
  - **Northern** < OE Northumbrian = Yorkshire northward
  - **West and East Midlands**
- English began to be used for administration in the 14th century, and spread in the early 15th century.
  - Orthography, still variable for Wyatt's contemporaries (1532), fixed rapidly between 1500 and 1650.
- **The position towards the end of the Middle English period:** lots of variation but slowly declining in formal contexts. **Dialectal variation in written texts starts to decline through the 16th and 17th centuries.**



# The process of standardisation

- So, let's pick up again in the late 15th century, heading towards the end of the Middle English period. Speakers are certainly aware at this point that there is plenty of variation around; here is a famous complaint of Caxton's about it.

## Caxton's hungry Northern merchant (1490)

And spacyally he axyed after **eggys**. And the good wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry for he also coude speke no frenshe but wold haue hadde **egges** and she understande hym not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue **eyren**. Then the good wyf sayd that she understood hym we. Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, **egges**, or **eyren**? Certaynly it is hard to playse every man, bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage.

What Caxton is arguing for here is the adoption of a standard. He bases his translations on a London dialect aimed at 'a clerke and a noble gentylman', which he thinks is more 'refined' — and contains much more French and Latin — than his own native Kentish dialect.

There are quite a few different **possible / incipient standards** at this point:

- The 'Wycliffite' or 'Central Midlands' variety;
- The Auchinleck manuscript variety (characteristic of London texts of the mid-14th century);
- The Chaucerian manuscript variety (London late 14th century);
- The **Chancery** variety (court administration of Henry V, 1413-22; Royal Chancery / government documents post—1430).

# The process of standardisation

How do we think that standardisation arises? No language is truly homogeneous; standards originate in pre-existing variation. Milroy (& Milroy, 1985), building on Haugen (1966, 1972):

## MILROY'S STAGES OF STANDARDISATION

Selection

Acceptance

Diffusion

Maintenance

Elaboration of function

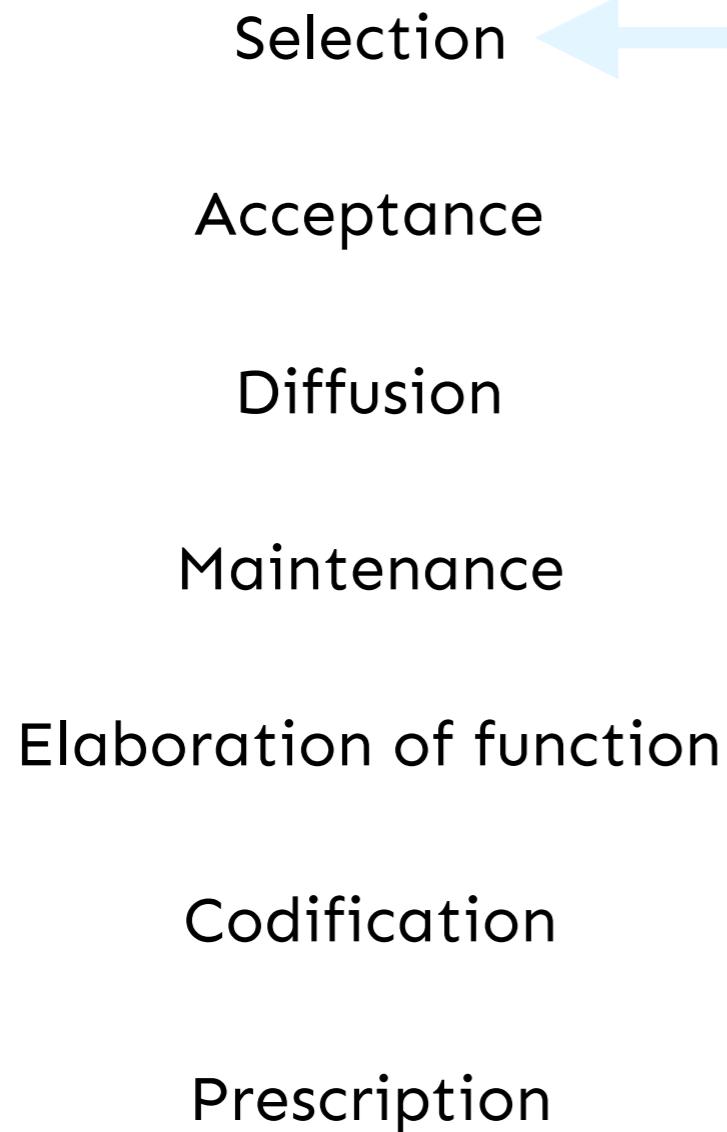
Codification

Prescription

# The process of standardisation

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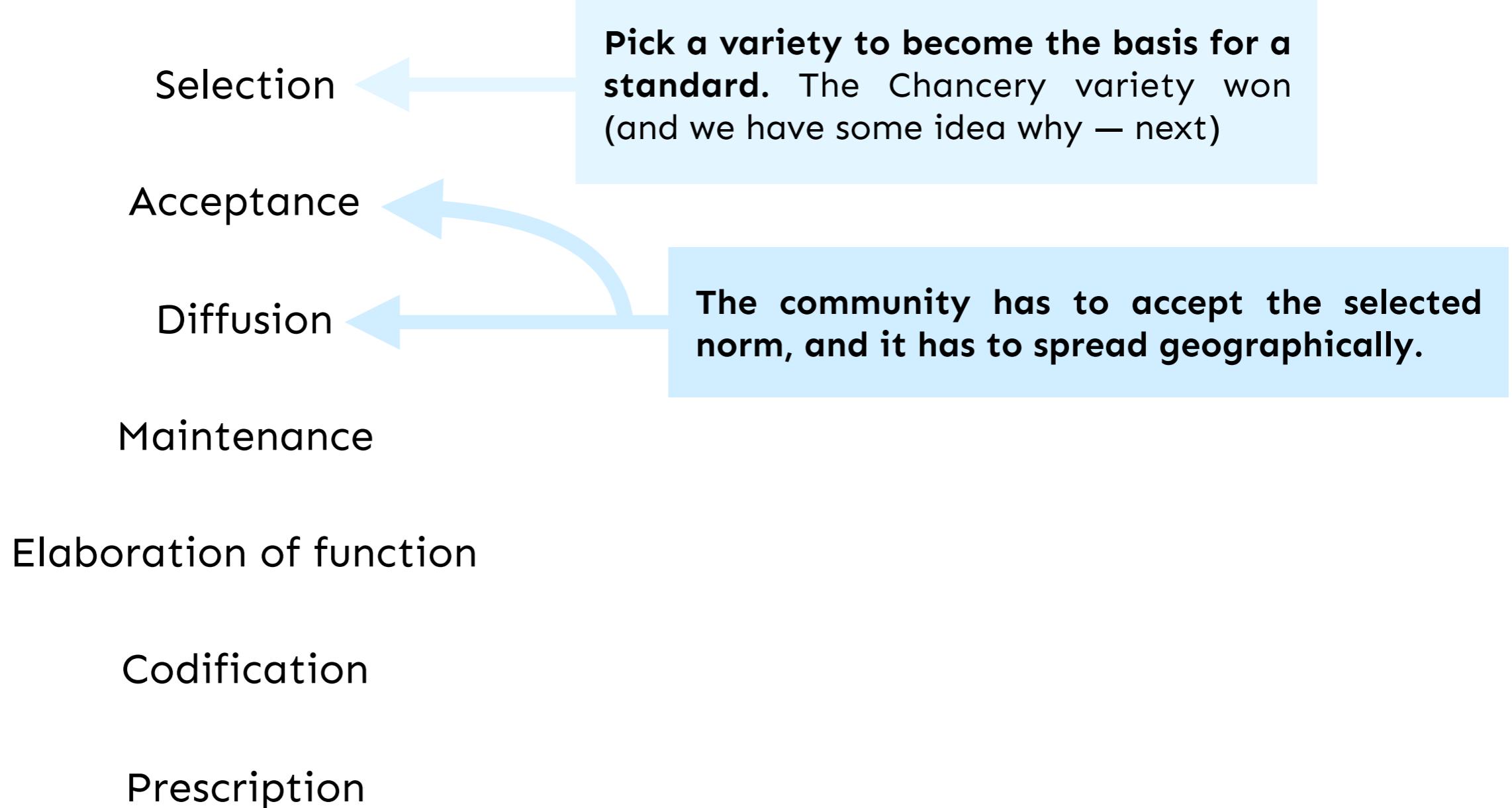


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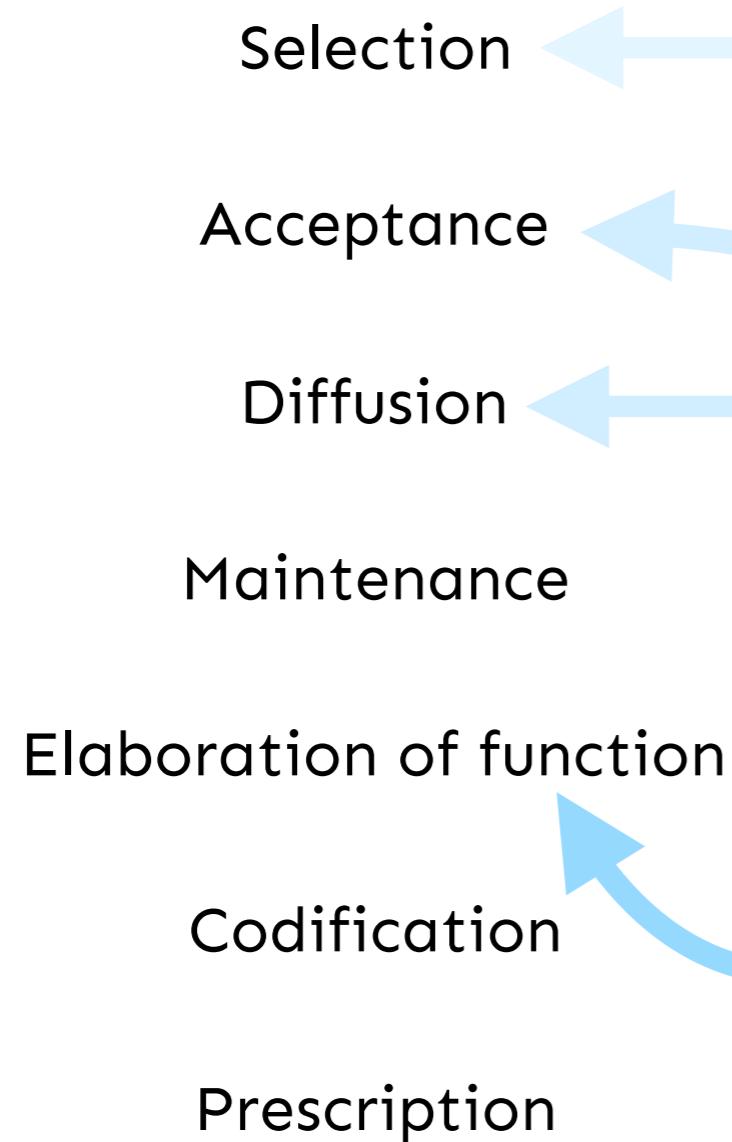
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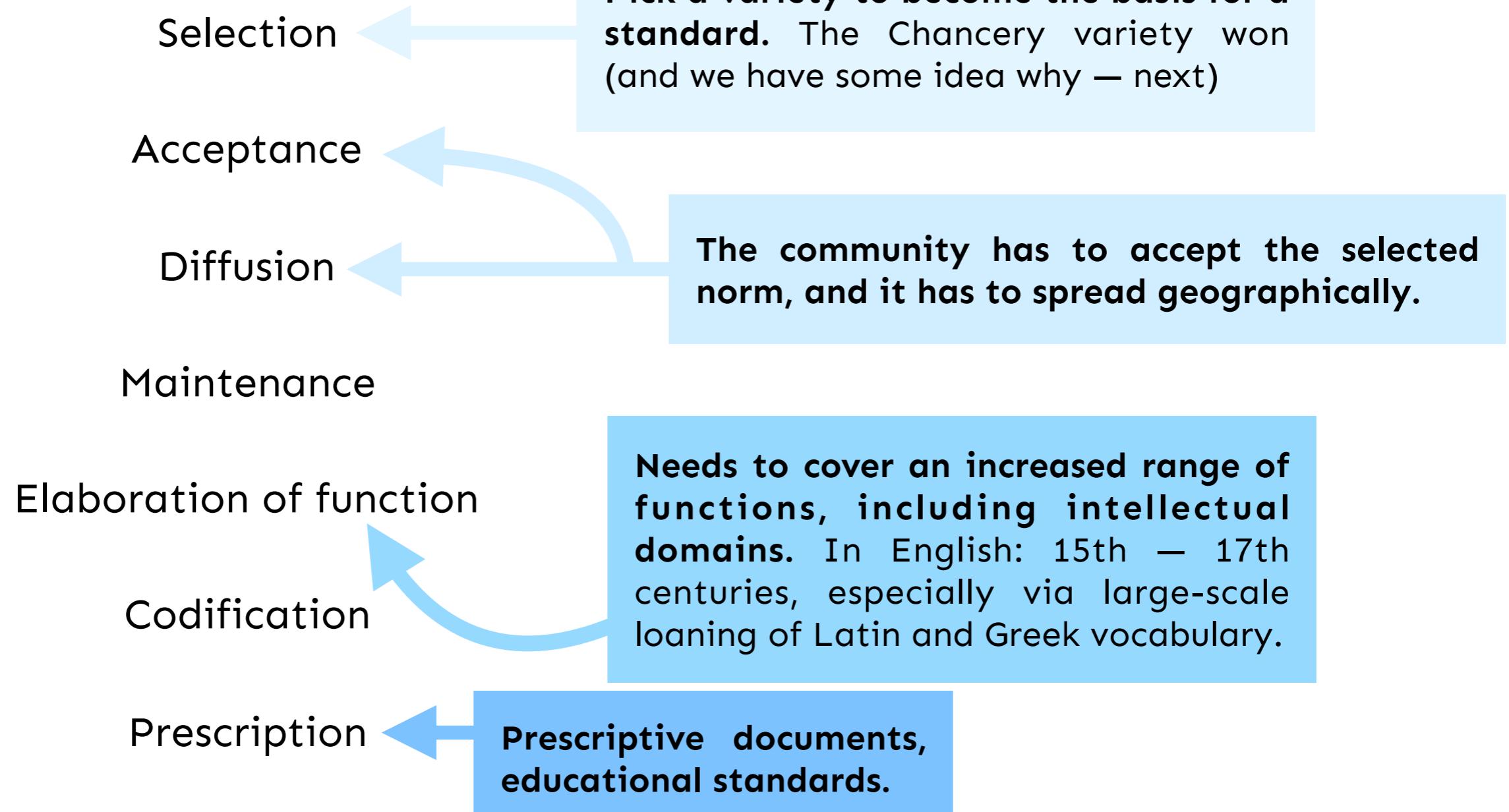
The community has to accept the selected norm, and it has to spread geographically.

Needs to cover an increased range of functions, including intellectual domains. In English: 15th – 17th centuries, especially via large-scale loaning of Latin and Greek vocabulary.

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# The establishment of the standard

- The winning option: **Chancery English**, mostly **East Midland** forms.
- Chancery clerks were trained to write Latin and French, with corresponding orthographic effects: **debt** (ME *dette*, Latin *dēbitum*), **doubt** (ME *doute*, Latin *dubitāre*), **indict** (ME *endite*, Latin \**indictāre*), **victuals** (ME *vitailes*, Latin *victuālia*), **salmon** (Latin *salmo*).
  - Occasionally, orthographic choices with no etymological basis: **island** (not related to Latin *insula*, French *isle*). And the rise of some spelling pronunciations: **adventure** (ME *aventur*, Latin *adventūra*), **advice** (ME *avis*, Latin \**advīsum*) and **apothecary** (ME *apotecarie*)

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## Letter of Henry V (1418)

Right trusty and welbeloued brother, we grete yow wel, **and** as we suppose it is **not** out of youre remembrance in what wise and how ofte we haue charged yow by our l[et]tres þat good and hasty rep[er]acon and restitucon were ordained and made at altymes of **suche** attemptates as hapned to be made by our sugettes ayenst þe trewes taken betwixt vs and oure brother þe duc of Bretaigne. And **not** withstanding oure saide l[et]tres diuers compleintes be maad and sent vnto vs for Defaulte of rep[er]acon and restitucon of **suche** attemptates as be made by certain of our subgettes and lieges, as ye may vnderstand by a supplicacon sent to vs by þe said duc. **Whiche** supplicacon we sende to yow closed wiþ ynne bees l[et]tres, for to haue þe more pleine knoweleche of þe trouthe.

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CHANCERY	others
such(e)	sich, sych, seche, swich, sweche
much(e)	moch(e), mych(e)
which(e)	wich, wech
no(gh)t	nat
many	meny
any	eny, ony
but	bot
and	ond, ant
if / yf	yif, yef

# The establishment of the standard

- Much variation was still tolerated at this point; but many of the Chancery forms 'took off', and have been retained into the present day.
  - **Morphological** choices: *those* (for *tho*), *-ly* (-liche), *Ø* (for *-en*, in plural verbs), *-ed* (for *-it*), *Ø* (for the perfective prefix *y-*, *i-*).
    - Some choices don't survive to this date: *be/been* (for *are, -(e)th*) eg.
- By 1700, standardised **spelling** is basically in place. More general question: to what extent did standardisation affect aspects of the language other than spelling?
  - What standardisation implies is **less written evidence for dialect variation**, though not necessarily less dialect variation per se!
    - Spenser uses dialect and archaisms to portray 'rustic' people. In Shakespeare's King Lear, Edgar disguises himself as a peasant, and uses the characteristic **southwestern** initial-fricative voicing: *Zir* for *Sir*, *vurther* for *further*.
  - — but at the same time, the number of texts explodes!

# The Early Modern English period

- Social, demographic, intellectual change. **Literacy** was already on the rise in the Middle English period, despite unsuccessful 14th and 16th century petitions to make it illegal for 'common' people to read —

1451–1500 5%

1501–1600 16%

1601–1700 53%

(Buringh & van Zanden, 2009)

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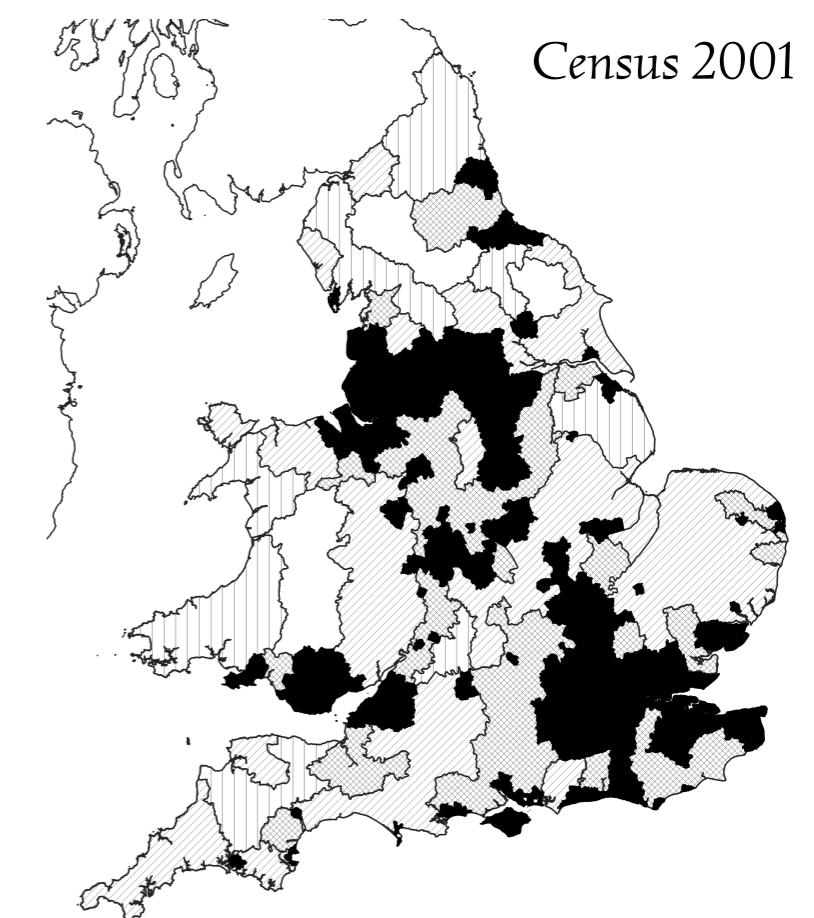
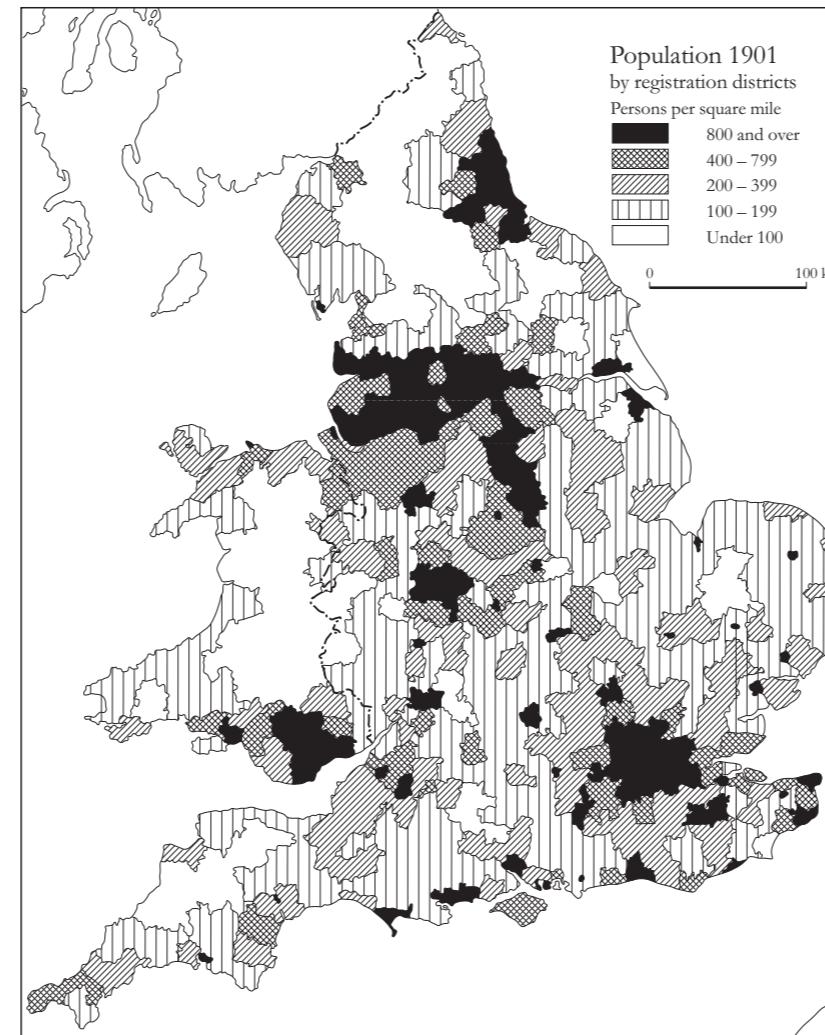
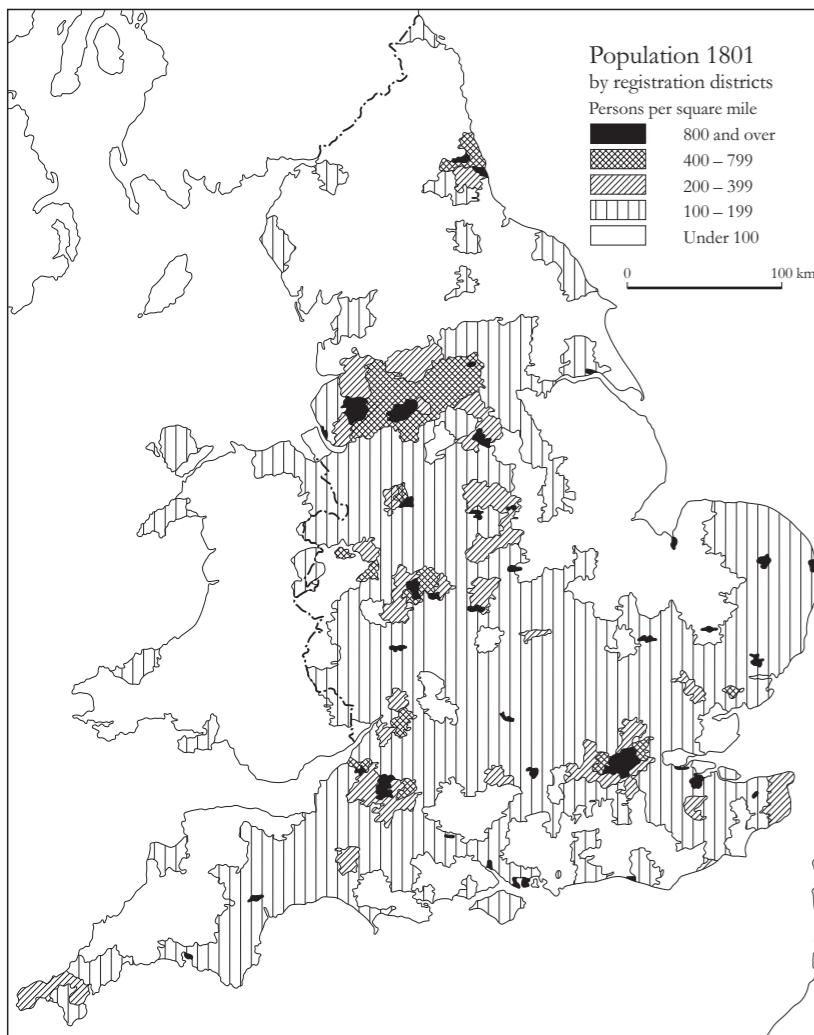
- — but probably very much hastened by the arrival of the **printing press** in England (1476).
  - Mass-producing and distributing texts is much, much easier: about 20,000 different titles printed in English 1476 – 1640.
    - A huge change; and a disadvantage for historical linguists! Whose language are we really looking at? The author? The editor? The typesetter or compositor?
    - Would be absurd to list all the texts, of course. Translating the Bible no longer got you strangled and burned (poor Tyndale, 1536); the hugely influential **King James Bible (1611)**; but the genres of texts start to diversify hugely in this period. The works of **Shakespeare, Marlow, Jonson, Milton, Spenser**; the philosophers and scientists **Boyle, Locke, Newton**; the diarist **Pepys** ...
  - All of this contributes to the **diffusion** and **maintenance** of a written standard.

# The Early Modern English period

- **Dialect mixing, dialect levelling, change.** We'll discuss these 'sociolinguistic' terms in more detail in future weeks of this term. **Rapid growth of London after the Middle English period;** extensive migration led to dialect mixing and to new dialect formation.
  - The population of London was 50,000 in 1500; 200,000 in 1600; 575,000 in 1700.
  - Earlier in the EModE (and even present-day E) period, there was little chance for **urban** dialect-mixing to take place; this is no longer the case by 1900, and certainly not today.

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- The varying patterns of migration on the one hand, and of the spread of written texts and a prescriptive standard on the other, leads to both **change from above** and **change from below** in the texts of the period.
  - The loss of **negative concord** (*not ... nothing* > *not ... anything*) spreads **from** Royal Court to other text types.
  - *are* for *be / been*, and *-(e)s* for *-(e)th* spreads **from** the 'North' into London English, with documents from the Royal Court showing features of this type **last**.
  - **Preposition stranding** in relative clauses (OE); in passives, questions, and with topicalisation (ME) — *the man that I spoke to; the man was spoken to; the man I would never speak to; who did you speak to?* — only becomes **prescriptively controversial** in the 17th century, attacked by Dryden.
  - Shakespeare uses **auxiliary do** variably in negatives and questions:  
*Do you not heare him? (Tempest, Appendix B)*  
*A heauie heart beares not a humble tongue. (LLL V, ii, 747)*
    - This *do* is first seen around 1400, but with a very low rate of incidence and is almost ubiquitous by 1700; within the canonical EModE period, very variable, and can actually be used for eg. authorship attribution.
    - In general, the state of **auxiliaries** is the major **syntactic** difference between EModE and present-day English; *I saw him not these many yeares.* vs. *I have not seen him for many years.*

# The persistence of variation

- So far, what we've been thinking about is **standardisation; mixing and levelling**, and the formation of new dialects; processes whose net effect seems to be to take a state of relatively unconstrained, chaotic variation (Middle English?) and produce a more uniform state of language (Early Modern English?).
- Of course, we know that this cannot be the whole of the story; there has never been a point in the known history of English at which the English of York was exactly like the English of London (etc.)
  - We've seen **major dialect regions** for Old English and Middle English; how similar is the geographic distribution of variation in Early Modern English and in present-day English?
    - We can't really answer this one in this lecture. In the remainder of the term, you'll see more on the geography and social stratification of variation; try to relate eg. the **age** of an 'innovation' and its distribution.

# Phonological variation and change

- Let's return to the matter of phonology that we started to think about at the beginning of this lecture. How do we draw direct pathways of phonological change between an earlier period in the history of a language and a later one?
  - We can reconstruct evidence for **phonological change** in the vowels of English over the Early Modern English period, which is why we can conjecture quite safely that writers like Wyatt would have had rather different pronunciation from writers like Johnson.
  - But **change over time** and **variation in space**, or variation between people, are closely linked; variation leads to change, change leads to variation.
  - Different varieties of a language can start out different and converge due to change; they can also start out in the same state, and end up different due to change taking place in one variety but not the other.
- In fact, many of the changes that we can think of as arising in the late ME and EModE period are not completely general across 'all English'; different varieties of English didn't necessarily undergo every change that we can single out and name.

# Phonological change: rhoticity.

- In Early Modern English —and as early as Middle English— r starts to disappear in certain environments.
  - The loss starts before s in words such as *bass* and *arse*.
    - The Cely Letters (15th century): *parcel* as *passel*; and the insertion of r in unexpected places (*farther* for *father*), suggesting that it was no longer clear to writers when to use it.
    - By 1770, r seems to be gone after vowels in 'southern English'.

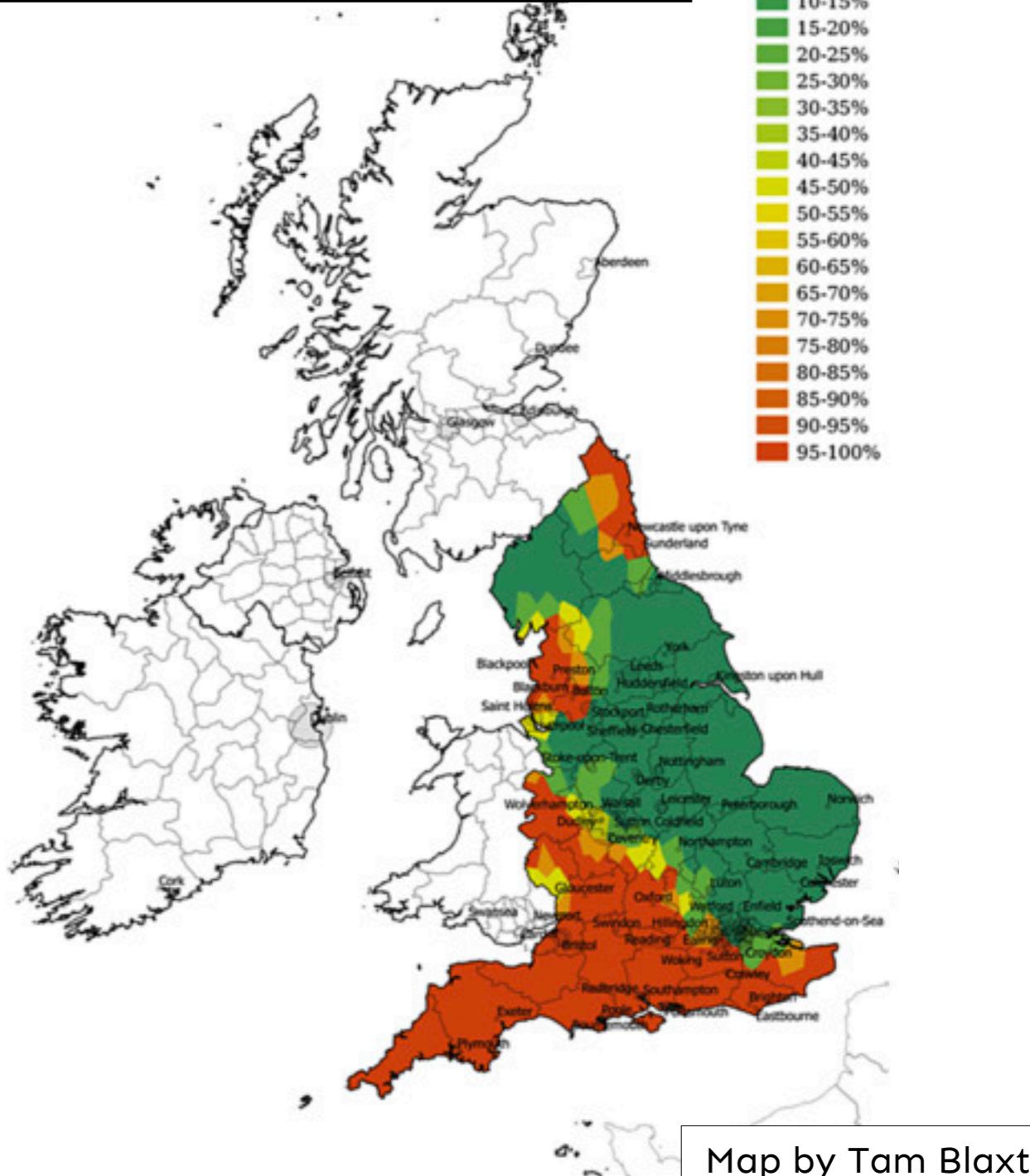
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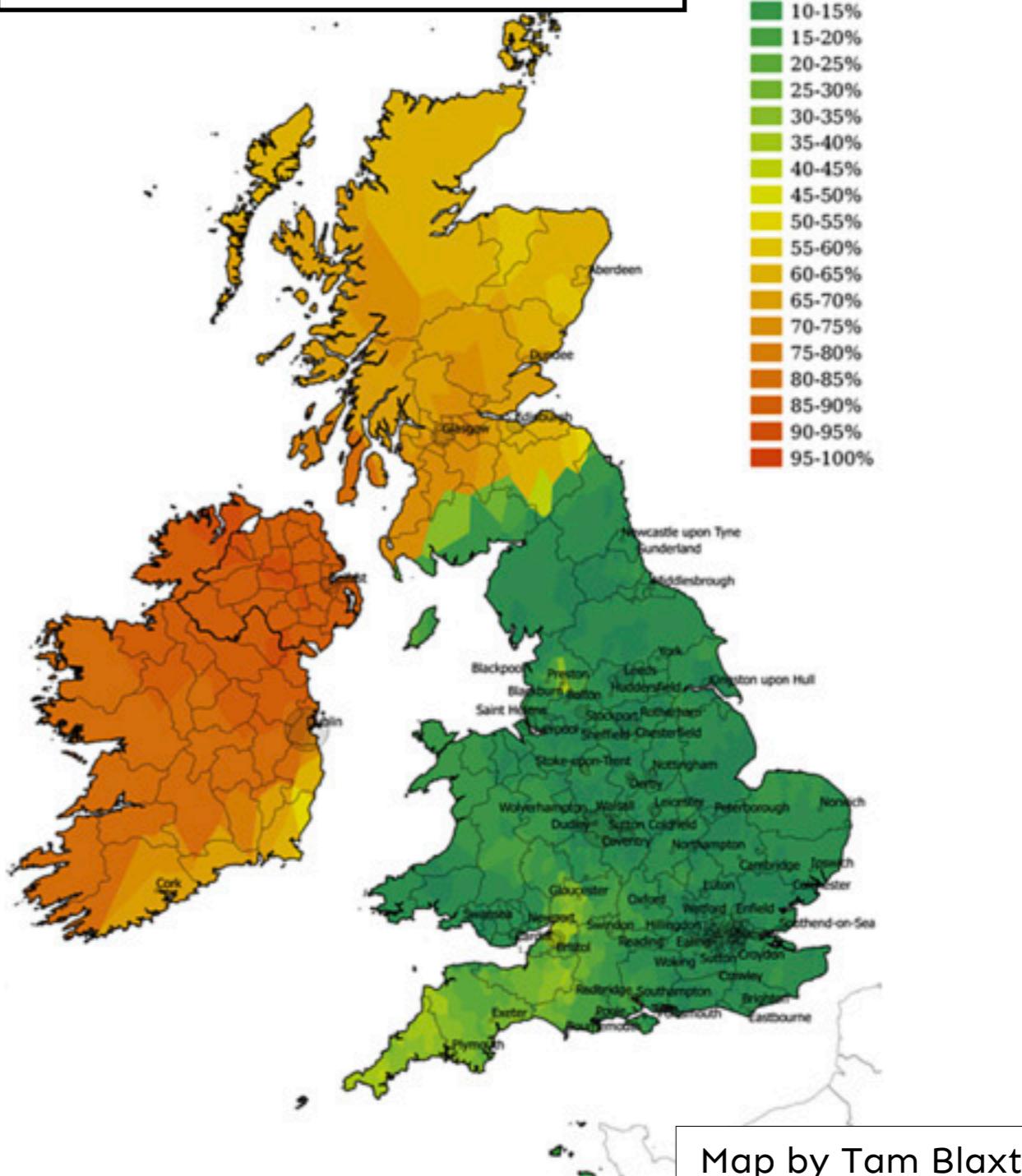
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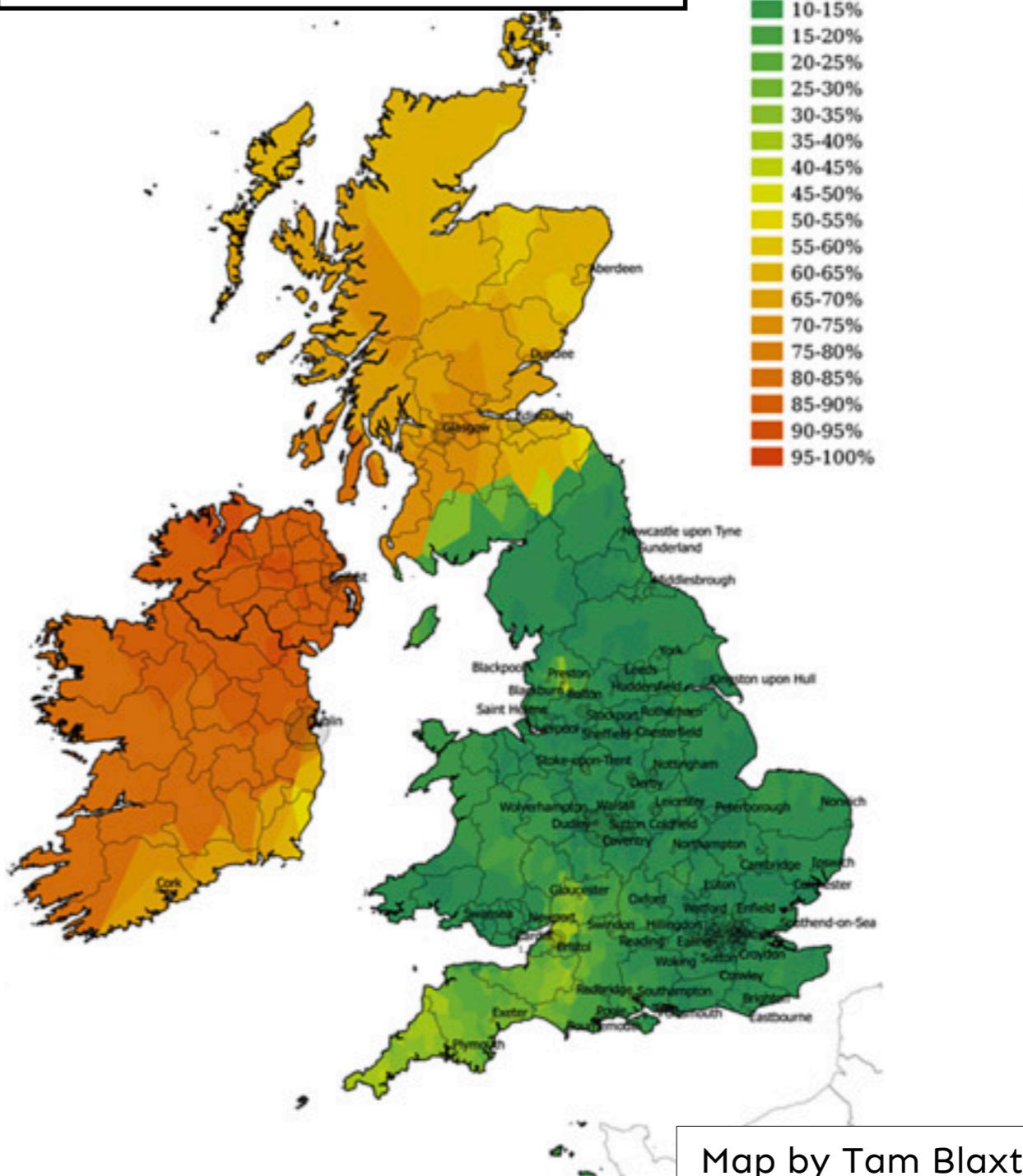
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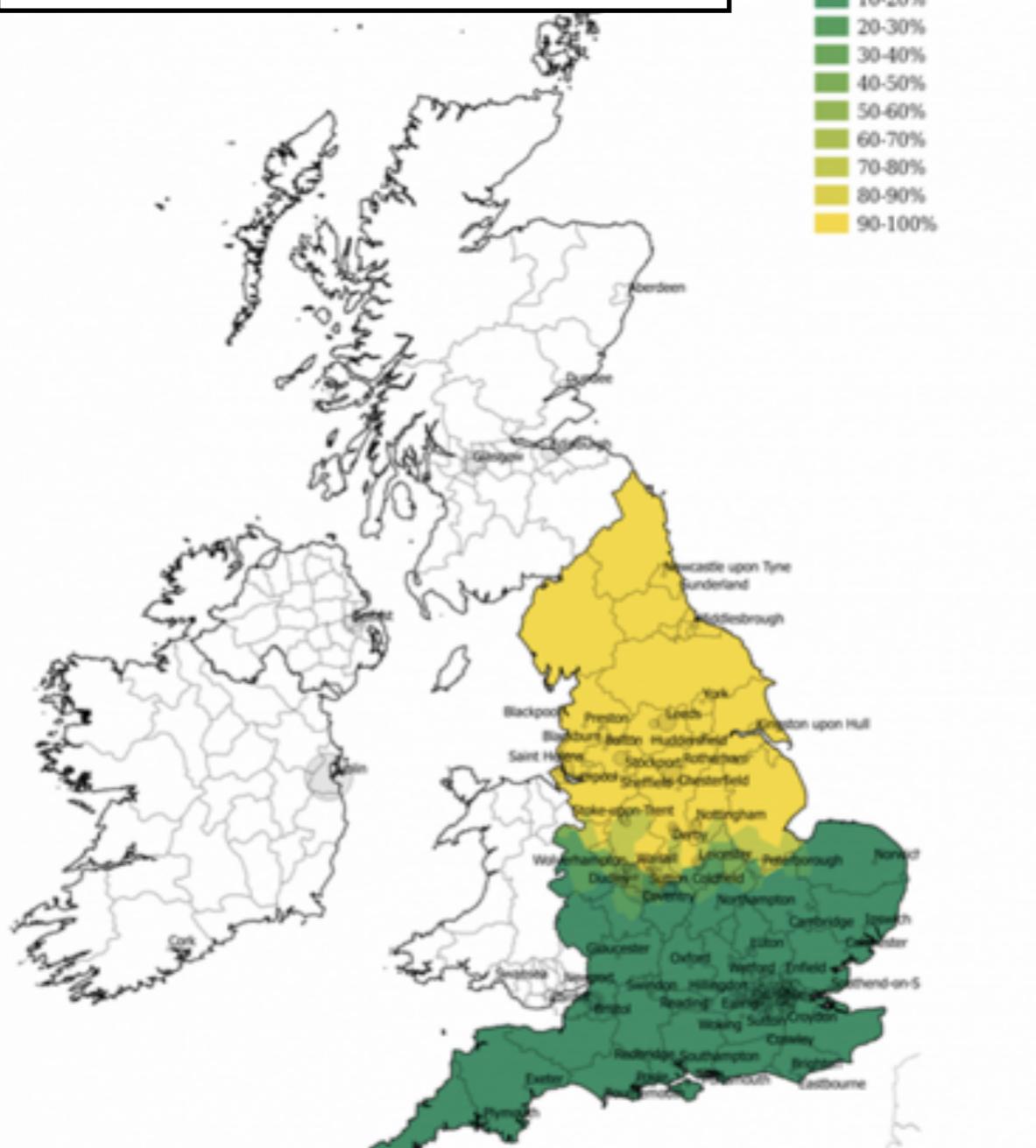
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- In the Early Modern English of 17th – 18th-c southern England, the Middle English short /a/ (TRAP) began to lengthen to /a:/ in some words.
  - This started before voiceless fricatives in the same syllable: *bath*, *staff*, *pass*; nasal + fricative clusters (*dance*), and nasal + voiceless stop clusters (*can't*).
  - This long BATH then changed in quality; so for modern Southern British English, the BATH vowel and the PALM class of vowels are the same (further back, more rounded).
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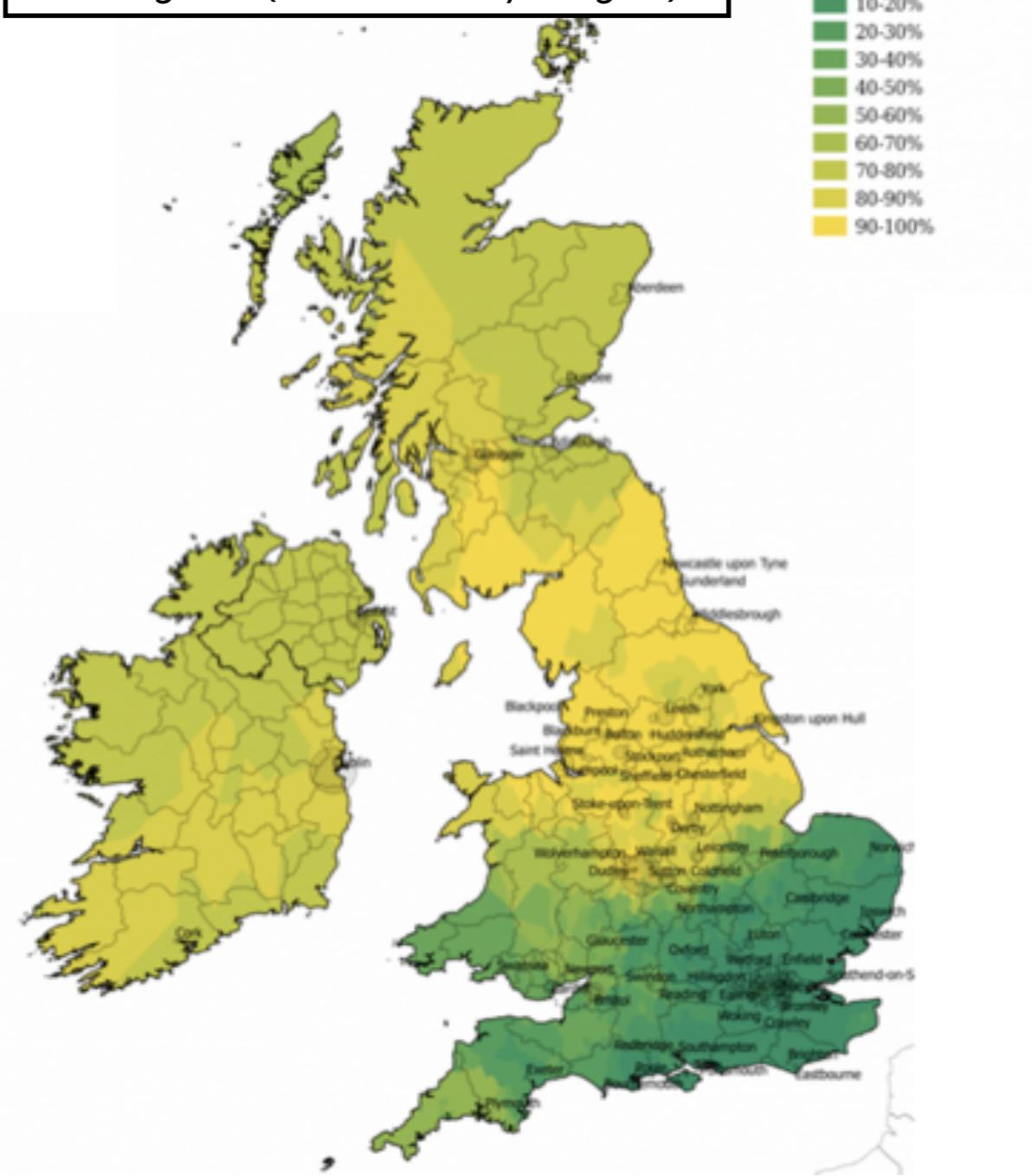


Map by Tam Blaxter.

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  - Again, some varieties didn't do this.
  - But unlike rhoticity, the **older / conservative variant** (no split!) doesn't seem to be going anywhere; there is almost no change over the last century.

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# Summary

- What we've thought about so far is the fact that **the relationship between history and geography**, between 'change' and 'variation', between 'standard' and 'dialect' — is complicated.
  - Even though the rise of print and written standardisation complicates our ability to infer the state of **dialectal variation** in early modern English ...
    - **Conservative** and **innovative** 'variants' for the same 'variable' (pre- and post-change variants) seem to be able to coexist, often as near neighbours.
      - The presence or absence of the TRAP-BATH split seems quite diachronically stable, across a sharp **isogloss** — geographically-close speakers either side of this line have managed to stay different for a long time.
      - — but simultaneously, some (traditional?) variants, like rhoticity, recede over time (under the influence of the standard?)
    - **In the next two lectures:** an overview of both 'traditional' and 'recent' phonological variation in English, both in the British Isles and outside them. Or: how to identify a speaker's place of origin ...

# Supervision 1

- **Some notes on the Week 2 exercise.**
- You're being asked to think about the geographical distributions of phonological features of British Isles dialects, some of which you may not know already; their phonological details will appear in the next few lectures.
- For geography, a good place to start is Trudgill (1999) 'The Dialects of English' (maps), & Wells (1982) 'The Accents of English' (no maps, but descriptions of regions); also Trudgill (1994) 'Dialects' (a workbook with maps, but uses non-technical language that we would like you to avoid using).