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The relationship between intra- and inter-individual variation and supralocalisation processes

The study of intra-individual variation, now firmly associated with the third wave of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2005), is anchored “in earlier studies of style (Labov 1966), speech accommodation (cf. Giles 1973; Giles & Powesland [1975] 1997), code switching (Blom & Gumperz [1970] 2000), and audience design (Bell 1984)” (Eide & Sollid 2011: 330). While these are important explanatory parameters, it is also of interest to consider the role of intra-individual variation in language standardisation processes. To do so, the current paper considers supralocalisation processes, i.e. “the process by which [...] linguistic variants with a wider socio-spatial currency become more widely adopted at the expense of more locally specific forms” (Britain 2010: 193), through the investigation of intra- and inter-individual variation in Early Modern English trade correspondence. More precisely, the study is based on a corpus of c. 100 business letters related to the York Merchant Adventurers’ Guild, i.e. one of the most influential guilds in overseas trade since the late Middle Ages. The letters contained in the corpus were written by merchants from and/or travelling to Antwerp, Danzig, Hamburg, London and York during the period 1500–1700. The two linguistic features selected for the investigation were undergoing change during the Early Modern English period, notably the third person singular present tense indicative and periphrastic *do* (cf. Nurmi 1999; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg [2003] 2017; Gordon 2017; Oudesluijs 2019). For both linguistic features, verb type and region will be particularly focused on. The linguistic variation within and across the letters, also in the context of the writers’ origins (as far as known), will shed some light on individual stylistic letter writing practices as well as the supralocalisation processes and standardization (in writing) of the linguistic features. A comparison to existing studies on the linguistic features covering the same period will further illuminate to what extent intra- and inter-individual variation provide insight into supralocalisation/standardization processes. Finally, some challenges of working with business correspondence from the Early Modern English period will be discussed.

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