

Patterns of linguistic variation in pauper petitions from the parish of Pangbourne, Berkshire

The study of patterns of linguistic variation, both on a community and on an individual level, which allows us to shed light on social reasons for language variation and change, as well as attitudes to language variants, have traditionally been the main focus of variationist sociolinguistics (Labov 1972; Eckert 2008). Variationist concepts and paradigms, such as variation patterns, have also been applied in linguistic fields like historical sociolinguistics.

In line with other historical sociolinguistic studies (cf. Auer 2015; Hernández-Campoy 2016; Schiegg 2016, 2018), the current paper will focus on patterns of linguistic variation, notably inter- and intra-individual variation, in a set of more than twenty pauper petitions that were sent to the overseer of the parish of Pangbourne in Berkshire during the period 1818–1830. This sample of petitions contains multiple letters written by the same applicants for poor relief, which allows us to study both intra- and inter-individual variation. While synchronic variationist studies, which are still largely based on oral data, take the perspective that the individual speaker has learnt and therefore reproduces the community language in the first instance, the historical sociolinguistic approach relies on written data and therefore needs to take into consideration the education of writing skills within the community. In fact, as elementary compulsory schooling was only introduced in 1870 in England, the variation patterns displayed in the pauper petitions will reflect the level of education of the individual writers and provide insight into language acquisition processes. Moreover, as the petitions were written at a time when written English was largely codified, a comparison to linguistic norms will allow us to shed light on the role of social stratification in language variation and change at the time.

This paper will first provide some background information about the pauper petition data and the context in which they were produced. Thereafter, intra- and inter-individual variation will be investigated with respect to orthographic variation, e.g. h-dropping and h-insertion, etc. The findings allow us to make claims about the received writing training of the different applicants, their linguistic repertoires, as well as social reasons for language variation and change in early nineteenth-century England.

References

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