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*Style-shifting in the use of synthetic and analytic comparative adjectives:  
Evidence from private letters in 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century England*

The study of intra-speaker variation in the field of Historical Sociolinguistics has provided us with the opportunity for reconstructing socially-based variation patterns in remote speech communities by observing individuals' sociolinguistic behaviour taking into account context types and addressees (Pallander-Collin, Nevala, & Nurmi 2009; Hernández-Campoy & García-Vidal 2018a; 2018b).

The present paper aims at exploring patterns of style-shifting from 1400 to 1800 in English historical correspondence by applying current theoretical models of intra-speaker variation: Audience Design (Bell 1984). The study is carried out through the analysis of the use of synthetic and analytic mechanism in English for the construction of the adjective comparison by members ascribed to certain social groups when addressing recipients from different social orders in private letters drawn from the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (PCEEC) and the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension* (CEECE). 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. Therefore, the informants show upward verbal adjustments by making a more frequent use of the analytic form with their upper social-ranked addressees than when addressing equals or relatives. Similarly, members from upper social orders exhibit downward accommodation when addressing relatives or lower social-ranked informants by making a higher use of the synthetic form. In addition to tracing language variation and change in speech communities, private letters may also shed light onto the motivations and mechanisms for intra-speaker variation in individuals and their stylistic choices in past societies such as those of the late Middle and early Modern English periods. 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.

## **References**

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