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Intra-text variation as a case of intra-writer variation: Middle English scribal behaviours

The concept of variation has been fully utilized in historical sociolinguistics. Variation in a community often reveals social conditioning in language change, showing, for example, whether it is "from above" or "from below". Variation of a single writer is also worth exploring as it often reveals different styles of language use. One variant may be more formal than the other variant(s), and the latter may be preferred when the writing is addressed to close friends or family members. The present paper discusses yet another but related type of variation, namely intra-text variation.

While quantitative methods are often used in the analysis of variation, there are texts for which the simple normalization of frequencies based on the entirety is not ideal. For instance, one variant may appear on the first few pages only and does not appear elsewhere. *The Chastising of God's Children* in MS Pepys 2125, Cambridge, which dates back to the 15th century, is an example, where *hit* (the older form of 'it') occurs collectively on the first few folios and *it* (the newer form) occurs elsewhere (Iyeiri 2013). The distribution of linguistic variants of this kind has traditionally been discussed within the framework of "progressive translation", by which the gradual change of the scribal attitude towards the exemplar is implied (McIntosh et al. 1986, I, 15–17). This paper argues that scribal behaviours of this kind are interesting from the historical sociolinguistic perspective as they aptly reveal how writers reacted to ongoing linguistic changes, including orthographic or even graphemic changes, eventually also demonstrating social conditions relevant to them. This paper discusses the same text as mentioned above, namely the *Chastising*, by exploring the variability observed in it between *womman* and *woman*, and shows that the shift to *woman* was in progress in the 15th century and that it was a change from below.

References

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