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Sense and sensibility: Verbal morpho-syntax in nineteenth-century Scottish emigrants' letters and the intersection of standard and vernacular usage

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses verbal morpho-syntactic features in a corpus of nineteenth-century letters written by encoders of Scottish origin, whose levels of education vary quite considerably. The aim is to identify the features which appear to be most resistant to anglicization, paying particular attention to instances of the so-called Northern Subject Rule, and to modal auxiliaries. The aim is to shed more light on Late Modern English beyond the materials currently available for the study of this variety, especially as far as Scotland is concerned. Data compiled to date will be examined against data available in the recently-launched *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing, 1700-1945*.

1. Introduction

While written documents typically reflect an attempt to imitate standard models of educated discourse, letters place themselves at the intersection of formal modes of address and much less formal ways of conveying personalized and intimate contents. As observed in other studies (e.g., Dossena 2008a and forthcoming a), it is therefore possible to use such documents as witnesses of vernacular usage, where less monitored linguistic choices derive from the greater importance given to the immediacy of the message and to the often powerfully emotional relationship existing between encoders and recipients. In particular, it may be interesting to focus on texts written by minimally-educated encoders; predictably, they are not written in dialect, but they do include regional features, whether in spelling or syntax, which may help the investigation of socio-geographical variation.

The decision to concentrate here on verbal syntax and morphology in popular writing is meant to shed more light on Late Modern English beyond the materials currently available for the study of this variety, especially as far as Scotland is concerned. My analysis will rely on and compare materials of the *Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence* (19CSC, currently in preparation at the University of Bergamo: see Dossena 2004 and 2006 and Dossena – Dury 2008) and the nineteenth-century "personal writing" section of the *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing* (CMSW), comprising ca. 513,000 words and accounting for ca. 9% of the total.

The *Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence* is a collection of letters written by (or on behalf of) men and women of varying ages, from different social backgrounds, and for different purposes. It aims to be a "second-generation corpus" (Mäkinen 2006): i.e., one allowing clearly defined, focused studies in which scholars can concentrate on relatively few authentic texts, rather than edited ones, in order to highlight the specificities of linguistic traits without the risk of interfering "noise" created by editorial choices (Lass 2004). Indeed, as shown by Kohnen (2007 and 2008), qualitative analyses of a homogeneous corpus may show a validity that goes beyond the statistical one, especially when the object of investigation is barely quantifiable, on account of its elusiveness or intrinsic variability (such as that of speech acts, evaluation and modality).

At the moment of writing (October 2011) 19CSC comprises ca. 450 letters (between drafts, fair copies[1] and archival copies, equally distributed between familiar correspondence and business letters), for a total of ca. 120,000 orthographic units. The structure of the corpus, therefore, addresses

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[1] By "fair copies" we mean letters that were actually sent. In some cases, fair copies were in fact the first and only draft, as shown by the self-corrections appearing in them, as time or financial constraints did not afford encoders preliminary drafts.

I gratefully acknowledge permission to quote from MSS held in the Glasgow University Archives, the National Archives, the National Library of Scotland, and the Archives of the Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh, and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in Toronto. Such permission does not extend to third parties, so the quotations presented in this paper should not be used elsewhere. I am also indebted to Richard Dury for his help in the design and compilation of 19CSC, and for valuable comments throughout the investigation process. In the examples most names, locations and dates are omitted for reasons of privacy. Line and page break indicators (# and ###respectively) are normally omitted for reasons of space and legibility.

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a few interesting methodological questions, some of which augment those addressed by Jucker – Taavitsainen (2008). From the terminological point of view, for instance, the label "orthographic unit" is deemed to be preferable to "word", because in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts words often coalesced orthographically, and introducing artificial breaks would disrupt the authenticity of the transcription (see Lass 2004 and Dury 2006 and 2008). Also, I prefer to use the term "encoder", instead of "writer", as the latter can only apply to holograph letters. When the contribution of an amanuensis cannot be excluded, or is in fact expected, as in the case of managers dictating to secretaries, the person who actually "writes" the letter is not necessarily the person whose meanings are conveyed (see Dossena, forthcoming b). As for "sender", this may also be appropriate, though of course messages could additionally be conveyed on behalf of subjects other than the one who actually sent the letter. The term "recipients" is considered preferable to that of "addressees", as the person to whom the letter was actually addressed was not necessarily the only person who read it – in fact, as is well-known, in Late Modern times letters were often circulated among friends and family. This is especially true of emigrants' letters, as these often included messages to / from participants other than the individual encoder and specific addressee.

This corpus of correspondence is further supplemented with transcriptions of diaries written by people whose linguistic competence is comparable with that of the letter writers. The aim is to have a relatively wide range of encoders, from the least schooled to the best educated, both men and women, of various ages and differing social classes, so that phraseological variation, syntax and pragmatic features may be studied across registers and styles: not only "standardized" ones, but also those that may approximate spontaneous (and perhaps less educated) usage.

The modular structure of 19CSC has already enabled a series of studies on different aspects of Late Modern Scottish correspondence, whether of a business or familiar nature (see, for instance, Dossena 2008b, 2010a and 2010b). In particular, as regards the latter, special attention has been paid to the letters encoded by emigrants, in an attempt to provide first-hand material for the study of "language history from below". This is consistent with recent socio-historical lines of research that focus on documents previously disregarded by linguists, on the assumption that they had little, if anything, to offer, because of their supposed divergence from standard texts. In fact, the case is much more complex: encoders often attempted to imitate standard models (for instance, when employing opening and valedictory

formulae), but their texts also provide invaluable instances of vernacular usage (see Schneider – Montgomery 2001).

2. Instances of vernacular syntax and morphology in 19CSC

In this section I intend to focus on two aspects that have often taken centre stage in studies of Scots and Northern English. In particular, I mean to discuss features of syntax and morphology that have typically been assumed to be among the most marked ones in these varieties, i.e. certain uses of modal auxiliaries and the employment of the so-called Northern Subject Rule. Such features will be analyzed in terms of their semantic value and, from the morpho-syntactic point of view, in terms of their relationship with subject type, so as to highlight any constraints that may seem particularly relevant.

2.1 The Northern Subject Rule

This feature, dating back to Older Scots and observed in Northern Middle English (see King 1997 and Macafee 2002), is normally described as the rule according to which the Standard English contrast between the verbal endings -*s* in the 3rd person (singular) and -*ø* in the other persons (singular and plural) only occurs when the adjacent subject is a personal pronoun; when it is not, the ending -*s* may (and often does) occur in place of the ending -*ø* in forms other than 3rd person singular ones. Instances of this feature are frequent in proverbs and sayings, such as "Bannocks is better nor nae bread" or "When the kye comes hame". Murray (1873) discussed its historical roots quite extensively in *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland*:

> The modern Scotch usage, thay cum, the men cums, is identical with that of the Northern Dialect from the 13th century, which is incorrectly said by many English scholars (Mr. Guest, I think, is the father of the mistake), to have made all the persons of the present tense in -s. But this was only when the pronoun subject was absent; when accompanied by the pronoun, this tense was inflected (with exception of 2nd pers. sing. in -es, thow loves), as in modern literary English. In the Old North-Anglian indeed, the conjugation was:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Ih cyme | we cym-es |
> | ðu cym-es | ʒee cym-es |
> | he cym-es | hea or þa cym-es […] |

But before the date of the earliest Northern writings of the 13th century, the form without the -s had been extended to all cases in which the verb was accompanied by its proper pronoun, whether before or after it, leaving the full form in -s to be used with other nominatives only. […] In the verb BE where the plural (aron, area, are, ar, er, yr) did not end in -es, the presence or absence of the pronoun subject did not affect the form of the verb originally; but at a later date, the analogy of the other verbs, in which a form identical with the 3rd pers. sing. was used in the plural in the absence of the pronoun, led to the use of es, is, in like cases for ar, er, though only as an alternative form. In the same way was, wes, intruded upon wer, war, in the past tense. (Murray 1873, in CMSW)

In much more recent times, the possible origins of this phenomenon have been discussed in various studies, most notably by Klemola (2000) and Pietsch (2005), while Ramisch (2010) and Fernández-Cuesta (2011) have highlighted its occurrence in English dialects and with first-person subjects. Indeed, the relative diffusion of this feature was described as late as 1915 in James Wilson's *Lowland Scotch as Spoken in the Lower Strathearn District of Perthshire*:

As regards number and person, the chief difference between S. and E. [Scots and English] is that in the present tense the ending in z or s, which marks the third person singular, is in S. often used in all persons of the plural unless the verb follows immediately after a single pronoun, and also in the first person singular, especially when the present is used for a narrative past. (Wilson, 1915, in CMSW)

Interestingly, however, no occurrences are observed in CMSW, possibly because these texts, typically composed by educated authors, are based on published editions, and editorial interventions may have silently ironed out instances of "obvious mistakes". In 19CSC, instead, only manuscript sources are included, and several such instances are recorded, a few examples of which are given below. An occasion of existential usage is offered in (1), while (2) and (3) appear to indicate a collective subject; finally, (4) and (5) show the different forms of the verb with pronominal and nominal subjects in one and the same sentence:

(1)   I intend to go to Melbourne for there *is* good wages there. (East Strathdownie, 08.04.1856)

(2)   I see by your letter that wages *seems* to be on the increase in the
        Highlands this year. (Liddle, 08.03.1890)

(3)   I beleive [sic] times *is* pretty dull all over at present. (Gallup,
        28.03.1890)

(4)   I hope all the old friends *is* well I had a letter from Canada yesterday
        they *are* all in good health. (Liddle, 08.03.1890)

(5)   how *is* all the old fellows making out. what *is* Sandy and John
        Murray doing *are* they still in the fishing. I suppose they *are.* (Granite,
        31.10.1890)

Instances of actual, unmonitored usage thus seem to indicate the extent
to which this form was probably grammaticalized for these speakers, who
do not seem to be aware of the morphological discrepancy; indeed, they
use it quite consistently, and never correct themselves. At the same time,
these instances seem to stress the importance of the subject-type constraint
over the non-proximity constraint (cf. Schneider – Montgomery 2001 and
Fernández-Cuesta 2011). Similar patterns of contrast between spontaneous
usage and supposedly standard grammatical forms are also found in relation
to modal auxiliaries, which are the object of the next section.

2.2 Modality

Both epistemic and deontic modality play a very important role in any text.
When we focus on correspondence – and, in particular, on emigrants' letters
– we see that this role acquires special prominence. In such letters, in addition
to information about self and family and descriptions of people and places,
emigrants typically included personal opinions and evaluations concerning
their current life, or that of their recipients, and expressed requests and
wishes, hopes or intentions for the future.
        The frequency of modal auxiliaries in this section of 19CSC, given in
Table 1 below, appears to reflect typically Scots usage, with few occurrences
of *shall*, and relatively rare uses of *might, could* and *should*. However, it should
be noted that this part of CMSW comprises ca. 513,000 words, and that nearly
400,000 of these come from just three texts by educated speakers (Elizabeth
Grant's *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, 1898; John Miller's *Diary*, 1889; and
Elizabeth Spence's *Letters from the North Highlands*, 1817), which probably

accounts for the much higher frequencies of *shall*, *should* and *might* here than in 19CSC. As for the numerous occurrences of *would* in CMSW, these may be explained in terms of the frequent use of reported speech in memoirs and diaries.

Table 1. Modal auxiliaries in the corpora under investigation (raw numbers and, in italics, normalized figures per 10,000 words)

	Can	*Could*	*May*	*Might*	*Must*	*Shall*	*Will*	*Should*	*Would*
19CSC	49	12	74	8	52	7	230	17	71
19CSC	*4,08*	*1,00*	*6,17*	*0,67*	*4,33*	*0,58*	*19,17*	*1,42*	*5,92*
CMSW (19C personal writing)	279	28	324	193	236	114	361	260	736
CMSW	*5,44*	*0,55*	*6,32*	*3,76*	*4,60*	*2,22*	*7,04*	*5,07*	*14,35*

In 19CSC we find 51 occurrences of *I will* and 4 of *we will*, as opposed to 62 of *you will*, which indicates that the rule recommending *shall* with first-person subjects was not followed in these letters, despite the indications of prescriptive literature that had been so popular since the sixteenth century, and that had made this rule a frequent shibboleth, occasionally with humorous overtones (even David Hume had included notes on modal usage in his 1752 list of Scotticisms: see Dossena 2005: 66). In 19CSC a similar frequency pattern is observed in the case of *would*, to which the same rule prescribing subject combination applied, and which occurs 18 times with *I*, 2 with *we* and 11 with *you*.

In CMSW *I will* is actually more frequent than *you will*, while *we shall* is more frequent than *we will*, though of course the influence of text type conventions cannot be excluded when relatively heterogeneous documents are taken into consideration.[2] Nor should we exclude the importance of the encoders' writing ability in this respect: McCafferty – Amador Moreno (forthcoming) have recently highlighted uses of *will* with first-person subjects as instances of 'change from below' in their investigation of a corpus of Irish correspondence, and, together with other comparable studies of modality in Late Modern varieties, shed new light on the development of regional Englishes both in Britain and overseas. Indeed, even formal letters

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[2]   As the current online interface does not allow searching for phrases, I wish to thank the compilers of CMSW for permission to access the full corpus as text files.

may include vernacular uses that reflect the encoder's own grammatical competence, such as in "sir you gave a good advice but I am afraid you will not can take it yourself" (19CSC).

Concerning the semantic value of modal auxiliaries, in both corpora *may* and *must* are seen to occur with deontic as well as epistemic values – see the examples below: (6, 7, 8, 9) and (10, 11, 12, 13) respectively.

(6)   hope he may recover. (19CSC)

(7)   I will make few or no alterations, in order that there may be no delay. (CMSW)

(8)   you must excuse me at present for my short letter. (19CSC)

(9)   you must not think I forget my friends at home. (CMSW)

(10)   I may pull up into Colorado. (19CSC)

(11)   You may remember that Cairoli in a measure saved the Kings life while riding through Naples a short time ago. (CMSW)

(12)   It is sad news indeed about Willie and it must have been a very crushing thing for him, poor fellow. (19CSC)

(13)   These visits must have been regarded as formidable undertakings. (CMSW)

Epistemic modality is also employed metacommunicatively when encoders describe the reality in which recipients are expected to find themselves; in 19CSC uses of *suppose* (17 occurrences, all with first-person subjects) and *guess* (8 occurrences, all with first-person subjects too) typically focus on the recipient, as in (14) and (15) below:

(14)   I suppose you will be having your Social Gathering now. (19CSC)

(15)   I guess you will be having nice weather now. (19CSC)

In such instances the identification with the recipients is further emphasized by the use of the progressive form: while this is more frequent in Scots syntax

than in Southern English (see Miller 1993), it is nonetheless interesting to see it occur in contexts where the virtual simultaneity of action on the part of the recipient and of thought on the part of the encoder creates the imagined reality conveyed in the letter.

As for deonticity, this is expressed in the form of intentions, requests, hopes, advice and promises; while intentions and requests centre on the encoder, hopes, advice and promises generally focus on the recipient, as the vocabulary encoding them communicates what kind of reality the encoder devises for them.

In addition to its articulation in modal auxiliaries, deontic modality is expressed by means of lexical items that need to be tagged accurately in order to avoid ambiguities: the verb *to want*, for instance, is used in the sense of *lack* in a promise, as in (16):

(16)   as long as I live and my properity prospers you will not want a little Present every year. (19CSC)

This reflects Older Scots usage: in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* the following example is provided among others in the entry for *want, v.*: "The thesaurar to sers & deliver all weychts that wantis" (1577, Haddington Burgh Records). But it also features in a direct, bald-on-record request in a much later text:

(17)   I want you to bring 5 of the best kind of watches. (19CSC)

The expression of deonticity, on the other hand, does not merely concern requests. In familiar letters, and all the more so in emigrants' letters, hopes for the future or in fact even for the present of both encoders and recipients are always a very important part of the message, as the expression of emotional participation in each other's lives signals proximity and is crucial for the maintenance of social bonds. In the 19CSC section comprising emigrants' letters, the verb *to hope* is seen to occur as many as 98 times: on average, more than twice per letter. The phrases in which it occurs are always encoder-oriented (in *I / we hope, let us hope, hoping*) and recipient-directed (*hoping this finds you well / you will answer soon*). The verb phrase is occasionally reinforced with adverbs like *sincerely* and *earnestly*, both of which boost the truthfulness of the statement, beyond formulaic and predictable usage.

On the other hand, the encoder presents his statements much more modestly when advice is given; in such cases we come across two occurrences

of *my advice* and three of the lexical verb *to advise*. In fact, both noun and verb may co-occur in the same sentence (18), showing that the encoder did not pause to correct himself and avoid the repetition – style was clearly not a primary concern:

(18)   he asks my advice in the matter and I have advised him not to enter into aney despewit with you. (19CSC)

Other lexical items indicating both deonticity and awareness of face-saving requirements, such as *suggest*, *recommend* and *counsel*, never occur in 19CSC, possibly on account of their more formal overtones. In CMSW we have 11 instances of *suggest*, 24 of *recommend*, and 3 of *counsel, v.*

      Finally, it is interesting to observe how 19CSC encoders express mutual trust, on the basis of which advice may be given and received. Despite occasional differences with what is observed in the business correspondence section of the same corpus, in familiar letters modesty and mutual esteem are conveyed by means of linguistic strategies that also highlight common ground. In particular, faith appears to play a very significant role, as the expression of trust is typically employed with reference to trust in God or Providence, and not to the need to establish mutual credibility, thanks to the closeness of the relationship between participants (see Dossena, in preparation).

3. Concluding remarks

This study, albeit brief and restricted to very few instances of vernacular usage, has nonetheless shown the importance of studying unedited manuscripts for the investigation of spontaneous usage. While the documents in CMSW are mostly instances of educated usage, in which relatively few (if any) features of Scots blend into otherwise fully English texts, the texts in 19CSC allow us to investigate syntax and morphology in letters and diaries written by people from a variety of social conditions. When we see that CMSW comprises numerous documents by Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, David Livingston, and other leading figures in the Scottish cultural world of the time, comparing occurrences with those in a corpus comprising documents by far less well-known and (mostly) far less educated people becomes hardly practicable, requiring caveats like those which have been outlined in this study.

In particular, the 19CSC section including emigrants' correspondence features numerous texts encoded by people whose level of education did not enable them to write fully standardized English. What they wrote, instead, reflected their linguistic competence not only as far as spelling is concerned but also – perhaps even more importantly – in relation to syntax and morphology.

We therefore witness totally unselfconscious occurrences of the Northern Subject Rule, and modal choices that reflect long- and well-established Scots patterns. In these letters codes do more than mix: syntactic forms are seen to blend, and a special kind of grammaticalization appears to be at work in the constructions of users who command both Scots and English, though each to a varying extent. Indeed, such documents present the kind of linguistic cline that has been a feature of Scottish usage for many centuries – at least since the days when early codifiers of the English language began to recommend southern models for written discourse while speakers preserved their own usage in everyday exchanges (see Dossena 2005). In the case of modal auxiliaries, then, the rules that prescriptive grammarians had tried to reinforce since the sixteenth century, i.e. the "Wallis" rules that encouraged users to use *shall/should* with first-person subjects and *will/would* with second- and third-person subjects, are seen to apply only in the texts written by more educated speakers. Further down the social ladder such rules do not seem to have been acquired or applied to any great extent.

Lastly, from the methodological point of view, this study has underlined the importance of being wary of clear-cut distinctions and labels. While "personal writing" may be seen to constitute a set of texts comparable to other corpora of correspondence, the kind of encoders whose texts are included in the corpus, the way in which individual texts account for larger or smaller parts of the corpus itself, and the fact that not all these texts are actually based on authentic manuscripts, but rely on published editions, have a considerable impact on what kind of language instances materialize in the corpus itself.

Only in the past ten years have scholars started to write the history of Late Modern English; in the case of Scots and Scottish English, the road behind is even shorter and the road ahead longer, and longer still when "language history from below" is also meant to be considered. But hopefully small steps will continue to be taken in the right direction. Meanwhile, we should carry on gathering authentic samples in order to enrich the basis on which investigations may be conducted, as well as strive to improve on the analyses from which the process has started.

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