

THIRTEEN PASTON LETTERS IN SEARCH OF A STANDARD

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ABSTRACT

The present paper proposes an approach to the development of the so-called Standard English from a morphological perspective. To this end, we present the concept of Standard in order to show the different theoretical viewpoints from which its nature and origin have been analysed. Traditionally, when dealing with Standard most authors based their studies on spelling. However, in the last few years the validity of morphemic analysis has been recognised as a way of measuring the evolution of English in the last years of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance. Thus, we here propose the analysis of certain letters by Paston men as indicators of language change.

KEYWORDS: Paston letters, morphemic units, Standard English.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo pretende aproximarse a la cuestión del desarrollo del llamado Standard English desde el análisis morfológico. A tal objeto se presenta el propio concepto de estándar para mostrar las distintas perspectivas teóricas desde las que se han abordado su naturaleza y su origen. De forma tradicional, al hablar de estándar se hacía mayor hincapié en los aspectos relacionados con la escritura y la ortografía, pero en los últimos años se ha reconocido la validez del análisis morfológico como medidor de la evolución de la lengua inglesa de finales de la Edad Media y principios del Renacimiento. Así, aquí se propone el análisis de ciertas variables morfológicas de las cartas de algunos hombres de la familia Paston como indicio de ese cambio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cartas de la familia Paston, morfemas, inglés estándar.

0. INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been devoted to the history of the Paston family as well as to the language that the letters of different members of the saga wrote. (Davis 1971; Gómez Soliño, 1984; González Escribano, 1985; Markus, 2001). Notwithstanding this, no studies focused exclusively on the morphemic level of the Paston men have been produced yet. It is our intention to see whether there is a movement from regionalism to the standard in these texts, representative of non-official writ-



ing, or if, on the contrary, our samples illustrate the typical lack of homogeneity claimed by some authors (Mele Marrero & Martín Díaz, 2001:580).

To this end, section 1 will deal with the idea of “standard” from different points of view and some of the basic theories posed by different scholars, such as the traditional SAD theory and more recent ones defending the validity of macaronic texts for the study of standardization. Both perspectives will be tackled. Section 2 describes the corpus chosen as a source of data for this study. Such data will be analysed and debated in section 3. Since several years separate the letters chosen, we expect we will be able to find some changes in the type of language used. Section 4 will present the data obtained and section 5 will, hopefully, offer some preliminary conclusions about morphemic change towards the standard in the texts selected.

1. THE IDEA OF “STANDARD”

When speaking about Standard written English we probably think about a language that has a clearly defined orthography, lexicon and grammar. But before reaching this point a particular variety may have triumphed over all the rest, that is to say, it has spread and has become a model to imitate. After this selection, it has been codified, it has become apt for all linguistic functions and it has finally been accepted as the only valid variety for discourse. According to Haugen (in Smith, 1996:76) these four criteria (selection, codification, elaboration and acceptance) are the ones any variety must fulfill in order to say it is fixed or, in other words, that it is a standard. On the contrary, any variety meeting only some of the requirements “may be regarded as focussed and standardized” (Smith, 2000:129). In other words, a language is standardized or not depending on the homogeneity it presents. According to Jonathan Hope one of the most popular definitions of standard is:

The standard, *as any fule kno*, is a non-regional, multifunctional, written variety, historically based on the educated English used within a triangle drawn with its apexes at London, Cambridge and Oxford. Even more specifically, the propagation of this ‘incipient’ standard can be linked to a particular branch of the late medieval bureaucracy: the court of Chancery (2000:49).

Some other scholars make a further distinction between *standard* and *standardized language*:

A standard language will develop into a standardized language, but the reverse is not true. By ‘standardized’ I mean a language which has achieved a reasonable measure of regularity in its written form. (...) A standard language, on the other hand, is the written form which is either imposed or promoted over a wider geographical area than where it originated with the aim of making it the principal or sole written form in the country as a whole. (...) A standardized language remains either regional or personal; a standard language has been adopted more widely throughout the country. (Blake, 1996:7-8)



Be it as it may, we will here assume that Standard English fulfilled all these requirements at some point in its history. Several sources have been traditionally taken into consideration when dealing with the origin of Standard English, among which “Chancery English” has been one of the most often mentioned. Others have been the introduction of the printing press in England, the language of the Court or that variety used by men educated in the triangle formed by London, Oxford and Cambridge. No doubt all these have contributed to and have played their role in the formation of standard language. However, in the last decade or so, more and more scholars have defended the idea that the origins for the Standard must be looked for not only in the factors and places mentioned above but also somewhere else.

The different studies carried out by sociolinguistics from the sixties have demonstrated that language change takes place in several steps (not necessarily independent, discrete or even chronologically successive). These studies show that language change is, in the first place, a question of individual speech, that is to say, changes are produced more often when speaking than when writing as observed in today’s speech communities. It is only gradually that individual changes, after co-existing with the norm, may gain some ground and influence on other individuals of the community and, finally, become the accepted form depending on the degree of influence of such people (Labov, 1972; Milroy, 1985). The way in which the changes expand have been much discussed and classified according to the process and direction in which they develop, the type of social structure or network in which they first appear, etc., both in existing speech communities and in the past (Iglesias Rábade & Moskowich, 1993, 1997). We suppose that in its evolution towards standardization the English language must have suffered numerous and different changes that were at first reflected in individual speech and (not necessarily much) later assimilated into writing.

Among the different tendencies when approaching the topic there is one that clearly stands out. It is the one that places the origin of Standard English in what has been labelled “Chancery English.” It is likely that this tendency was somehow favoured by Eilert Ekwall (1956) whose studies on population movements in London between 1270 and 1300 were used as the basis for works by John Fisher (1977) and Michael Samuels (1989) among others. This approach shows no doubt about the responsibility of Chancery English in the growth of Standard English. As Fisher (1977:896) puts it: “(...) we may see the modern written standard emerging from conventions established by the clerks in Chancery between 1420 and about 1440, and spread by professional scribes throughout England by 1460.”

However, we agree with Wright (1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2001) in her consideration of texts that have not sprung from late medieval bureaucracy but from different commercial transactions. In this sense, non-formal or non-official texts such as memoranda and all sorts of notes and letters could be as valid witnesses and protagonists in the development of Standard English as acts of court, royal grants or legal documents of all sorts.

It is a fact that we can observe certain linguistic homogeneity in English writing from a particular point in time, namely, late Middle English. It was then





that several favourable circumstances met in order to promote the development of a language with national identity. It was then that confidence in the competence of the English language increased because it was considered valid to face all the communicative needs of that moment (Bourcier, 1981). Some scholars (Davis, 1951, 1952; Bourcier, 1981; Lass, 1999) affirm that there is a progressive linguistic selection that could account for the movement towards a more uniform and, thus, less regional and dialectal language. To reach this point, the amalgamation of different writing systems (originated, in their turn, in different dialectal varieties) was necessary until such amalgamation developed its own characteristic identity (Blake, 1996:172-3) reflected in the consideration of English as the language of a nation. Norman Davis describes in some of his works (1951, 1952, 1955) how the process followed by many writers who slowly changed their regional spelling in the direction of Standard English took place without any special conflict, mainly well into the Early Modern English period when standardization is considered well established (McIntosh, 1963; Görlach, 1993; Lass, 1999).

The most extended tendency is the one that maintains that this homogenizing process reflected in writing was originated in the particular linguistic use of a socially prestigious group. All other regional uses would inevitably tend to converge with this “more prestigious” one (Fisher, 1977; Fisher *et al.*, 1984). Inside this trend of thought, London is considered the city in which all of the speakers whose habits towards a standard were placed (Morsbach, 1888; Lekebusch 1906). Within this sense, the publication by Chambers and Daunt (1967) contributed to a better knowledge of English in the early 15th century in London. However, not all linguists coincide in their considerations, as is the case of Samuels (1981) who claims that there could not have existed a “distinct City dialect” in London since too many variants were gathered there.

A different approach is the one adopted by John H. Fisher, who attracted many an eye with his theories on “Chancery Standard.” He and some other authors defend the idea that this language born in the royal Chancery offices in the 15th century is the source of the language model imitated by the society of the moment. Fisher (1977, 1996) affirms that this particular variety would in time become Modern English.

Inside this tendency we are analysing, Morsbach (1888), Lekebusch (1906) and Flasdieck (1922) also considered the royal Chancery played a fundamental role in the diffusion of London educated language. It was Dibelius (1901) who first used the term *kanzleienglisch* to denote the London linguistic type. However, the theoretical approach that rejects Chancery English¹ as the only origin of Standard English is well represented by Laura Wright and Jonathan Hope.

¹ Samuels provided the term *Chancery English* with a more restricted and technical sense in identifying it with documents written in English from 1430 and sent all over the country.

The interest for the origin of Standard English gave rise to many studies. One of the pioneers was Edwin Guest (1838), who maintained that Present-Day English does not directly descend from the Anglo-Saxon literary Standard. Another one was R.L. Latham (1850), who pointed at the importance of London in the standardization process. T.L. Kington Oliphant (1873) held this same viewpoint, though he stated that London English was by then highly influenced by that of Central Midlands.

We can classify 19th-century studies in three main trends (Gómez Soliño:1984): authors emphasising the linguistic influence of certain prestigious writers (Chaucer, Wycliff, Caxton); secondly, those proposing London and Government institutions as the fundamental pieces in the construction of the new language, and, finally, those authors that do not focus on particular writers or geographical areas when searching for the source of English. Up to World War II and mainly inside the three approaches just mentioned, most studies on the origin of English Standard were carried out in Germany (ten Brink (1884), Morsbach (1888), Dibelius (1901), *Lekebusch* (1906), Frieshammer (1910), Flasdieck (1922).

The study of standardization went on after World War II. The research carried out by Ekwall in 1956 on London population in the late Middle Ages attracted many linguists' attention. In his study he used those Londoners' surnames denoting place names in the period stretching from 1270 to 1300. His aim was to discover the geographical origin of these people by placing their surnames on the map. The results showed a higher number of individuals coming from the South than from the Midlands, which contradicted what had been previously observed.

Nowadays, other authors such as Wright (1996b:104-105) think that the problem with Ekwall was that his methodology was neither accurate nor concluding. She affirms that the different varieties of a language are not hermetic and static. We cannot expect them to take place inside the isoglosses delimited by dialectologists. We cannot say that there has been a migration whenever a particular dialectal form is detected outside its geographical area.²

Ekwall and Samuels, historical dialectologists, sought to find the nearest part of the North, as it were, to London; and to locate an exodus from there, in order to explain forms found in the North entering London texts. The Midlands is the nearest place to fit these requirements. Is it, however, necessary to posit a migration of Northern speakers into London, to account for the new morphological

² Other authors insist that standard language should not be identified with a particular variety, since the latter is in continuous evolution. He adds that "if we take this process-based view of standardization, we can gain some insights that are not accessible if we view the standard language as merely a variety" (Milroy, 2000: 11). Notwithstanding this, "despite the effects of the principle of invariance on language description, languages in reality incorporate extensive variability and are in a constant state of change" (Milroy, 2000: 11). Thus, there seems to be a direct opposition between the static/ideal standard and other varieties in constant evolution.



forms? After all, linguistic features can move without a population movement, and over a period of 150 years (i.e., 1258-1400) we would expect a dialect to show change. (1996b:111)

The main problem is that the results Ekwall obtained were used as the basis for other studies. Among those that followed him, Benskin (1992) or Samuels (1989) can be mentioned. The latter classifies the texts produced in the 14th and 15th centuries in four groups that constitute the sources for Standard English. Contrary to Ekwall, who admitted that Standard English had some East Midlands influence, Samuels (1989) prefers to place this influence in the Central Midlands though he accepts Ekwall's proposal of population movements southwards from the Midlands (Samuels, 1989).

The reference to Ekwall is also present in the works of other scholars. Thus, Gómez Soliño (1984:24) mentions:

Si, como ya se ha señalado, la lengua estándar londinense es más un reflejo de los dialectos de las *East Midlands* y del Norte, por ese orden, que de ningún otro dialecto medieval inglés, habrá que pensar que o bien el inglés moderno se gestó directamente en las *East Midlands* como a Hübener y a Peitz les parece más lógico, o bien surgió en Londres tras haberse producido una alteración tipológica en el dialecto de la capital, como afirman Morsbach y otros, en cuyo caso hay que explicar la causa que produjo tal cambio. Esto último es lo que ha logrado Ekwall.

The studies published from the mid-twentieth century onwards insist on the fact that Chancery English is the source for Standard English. Some (Fisher, 1977; Cable, 1984) defend the idea that the clerks writing for the Royal Chancery were contributing to the creation of this new linguistic code as they standardized their spelling. However, others (Wright, 1996b) reject this idea since there is no evidence that the scribes had reached such a level of standardization. The problem with the first approach is that it only considers the origin of Standard English—and, in that sense, it may well have been in the Royal Chancery—but it does not consider other factors that may have intervened in its later development such as the printing press which played an important role in the evolution of the English language (Gómez Soliño, 1984).

We cannot know whether Caxton's intervention was that crucial or, on the contrary, whether the history of English would have been the same even without his existence since he had no intention to follow any standard (Blake, 1973). Other authors (Gómez Soliño, 1984) recognise the important role played by the printing press in the evolution of English (printed texts were intended for a bigger audience than Chancery texts) though they admit it was not so decisive. In fact, printed texts show diversity rather than uniformity in their spelling and the work of many foreign printers together with that of many English printers to use spelling variants that could not be readily understood by their readers may have delayed the standardization process.

For authors such as Milroy the standardization process takes place in three steps:



First, *the chief linguistic consequence of successful standardization is a high degree of uniformity of structure.* (...) Second, *standardization is implemented and promoted primarily through written forms of language.* (...) Third, *standardization inhibits linguistic change and variability.* (2000:13)

The expansion of Chancery English as the Standard of the nation is difficult to explain though it is known that the Court travelled with the king all over the country (Fisher *et al.*: 1984). This difficulty grows if we consider that it is a written standard. Tejada explains this phenomenon in the following terms:

En esferas alejadas de Londres no se produjo la imitación inmediata del estilo que allí exportaban los funcionarios. Parece que la práctica habitual pasó por el desarrollo de normas regionales, formas de inglés escrito que había suprimido de su repertorio los rasgos más exóticos del habla local, en favor de otros más neutros y ampliamente aceptados, que facilitaban probablemente la gestión burocrática y administrativa. A esto hay que añadir la labor más o menos consciente que desempeñaron los varones instruidos en las *Inns of Court* que volvían a sus lugares de nacimiento para ejercer sus carreras. (1999:13)

It is possible that the need for a fixed means of communication was also felt in other spheres such as in commercial transactions and business and not only in the Court (Wright, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2002). This would somehow have contributed to the creation and spreading of the Standard. Let us bear in mind that “it is possible that the spread of the national standard may have taken place at different rates in different genres of writing” (Taavitsainen, 2000:136).

Most documents written in the period in which the standardization of English is supposed to have taken place show a language that can in no way be called monolingual, but they are written in a mixture of Latin and English or Anglo-Norman and Latin. In these macaronic texts the linguistic mixture can be perceived not only in the lexical but in the morphological level too. A good example of macaronic texts can be found in one of the samples in our corpus, letter n. 2 by William Paston I, addressed to an unidentified lawyer in Rome where we can read:

(1) I haue, by aduys of counseill, in makynge a procuracie ad agendum defendum prouocandum et appellandum to yow (...) (Davis, 1971:3)

To ignore macaronic texts because of their mixed linguistic nature would mean to ignore most medieval texts as well as social and linguistic evidence (Wright, 1996a). It is probable that speakers of late Middle English and early Modern English did not feel bilingualism and diglossia as something strange. Thus, Chancery English “is just one functional variety of written English, with a very limited readership, whereas Standard English has come to be multifunctional” (1996a:3).

The traditional approaches we have seen in this section can be condensed in two different groups: on the one hand, those authors that defend a regional origin for Standard English, be it the East or the Central Midlands, and on the other, those who defend a national rather than a regional standard as is Chancery



English. Studies being carried out nowadays follow somehow divergent paths. Together with Wright, other authors seem to react against the idea of a standard originating from one particular variety. Thus, Hope (2000:49) opposes to the “single ancestor dialect, also called *SAD hypothesis* “not because the linguistic data supports it (in fact does the opposite, but because the family-tree metaphor demands it).” The single-source hypothesis has been certainly popular as claimed by Hope

The attractiveness of the SAD hypothesis is clear: it provides a neat explanation for the emergence of Standard English from the morass of competing variants in the Middle English period, and it is an economical account, since by operating at the level of dialect rather than linguistic feature, it automatically explains why any and every linguistic variant was selected to become part of the standard. The alternative would be an ‘every variant has its own history’ account, which would have to treat each variant as a separate entity. Such an account would present us with standardization as a random, haphazard process with no overall organisation. The SAD hypothesis is also highly teachable, because it leaves no loose ends, and because (in its ‘Chancery Standard’ realisation) it provides a clear motivation for changes: they happened because an identifiable group of people made identifiable decisions. (2000:50)

However, it is being reformulated to include the possibility of having a hybrid origin for Standard English which is, in our opinion, a more realistic approach, mainly if we take into consideration the mechanisms of language change as seen to work in present-day English. We agree with Hope when he claims that:

(...) the selection of single linguistic features from a range of dialects - features which are then recombined into a new dialect which lacks a common ancestor. Standardization thus becomes, not a unitary process operating on all dialects over a much longer time. (...) Standardization is not simply a set of decisions made by one identifiable group of late medieval bureaucrats: it is a complex of processes, growing out of the decisions made by a much wider range of writers in English (including, for example, the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people involved in keeping and exchanging business records). (2000:51)³

Of course, certain processes occurred during the standardization cannot be easily accounted for by what he calls “linguistic naturalness.” Hope finds an explanation for speakers’ choices apparently not so natural in certain social constraints that make them choose more complex structures.

³ Hope’s standpoint here coincides with that defended by the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English*. This *Atlas* demonstrated that the isoglosses used to delimit the five dialectal areas traditionally considered (Northern, West Midlands, East Midlands, Southern, Kentish) did not really exist as such.



We believe, with Hope (2000) and Wright (1994, 1996b, 2000, 2002) that Standard English was not consciously created after a decision taken by the members of the Royal Chancery but it was rather created by all those people who could write.

2. OUR CORPUS

The linguistic situation in late Middle English is one of great diversity, in which different varieties coexist with more or less difficulty as regards their mutual intelligibility, in other words, the “one word, one spelling” system was not yet in operation” (Wright, 1999:170). However, texts intended for printing were often corrected by printers (Samuels, 1981:44). These corrected editions are the ones that contributed to the idea of the Standard. In this sense, texts that were not, in principle, intended for publication are closer to the real linguistic situation than those texts that have been manipulated in one way or another. Letters could be grouped inside the first type and thus be more representative of the language of the period in which the Standard was being developed (Davis, 1955).

The source of data chosen for this research is constituted by some personal letters belonging to the Paston family as edited by Norman Davis (1971). Since the origin of Standard English is generally placed in the limit between Middle English and early Modern English, the Paston letters seem relevant evidence for our purpose here.

However, it is not our intention to enter the question of periodisation already addressed by many authoritative scholars.⁴

The letters selected can be divided into two main groups on a chronological basis: those in the first group were written in the first half of the fifteenth century (from 1425 to 1452, a period in which the process of Standardization advances and becomes firmer) and the second one belongs to the last years of the same century and the beginning of sixteenth century (from 1489 to 1503, see table 1).

There are some reasons that explain the selection of this material. In the fifteenth century, there was a growth in literacy and bureaucracy became more complex; as a consequence of this new situation, written production began to increase both in quantity and quality. Among the different types of documents, letters became a new form of record especially for families. They were personal archives as well as a new way to communicate in the distance. People began to use them not only for their business affairs but also for their personal relationships.

⁴ The two main tendencies have been the one defending external or outer history as landmarks for the history of language (Fennell, 2001; Blake, 1996) and that in which only intrasystemic events have been considered (Görlach, 1997).



From that moment onwards almost every family had its own archive; but the evidence preserved amounts to just a dozen groups from the fifteenth century (Barber, 1981). Among this reduced number of texts, the Paston letters, together with the Stonor papers and the Cely papers, constitute one of the best and most complete collections (over 360 letters and memoranda). On the other hand, many of these texts were not written in order to conform to a style; therefore, if we take this piece of information and we add to it the relevance and role which letters were acquiring, the Paston letters represent a suitable source of information about the state of language at that time.

The period studied by the present work covers from 1425 to 1503, as we can see in the table below. The first date, 1425, corresponds to the year when the first letter was written by one of the men belonging to the Paston family. On the other hand, the last date, 1503, corresponds to the latest letter written, whose author in this case was John Paston III (William Paston I's grandson).

The texts analysed comprise a total amount of approximately 6,000 words which seems enough for a tentative first approach to the topic. The total number of words found in each text, their author, their addressee, the numeric reference given to each letter by Davis (1971) and the date when the letter was written is shown in the following table:

TABLE 1. LETTERS SELECTED				
YEAR	AUTHOR	LETTER NUMBER	ADDRESSED...	NUMBER OF WORDS
1425	William Paston I	1	To John Staynford	325
1425	William Paston I	2	To an unidentified lawyer in Rome	522
1425	William Paston I	3	Probably to Master John Urry	498
1426	William Paston I	4	To William Wostede, John Longham, and Piers Shelton	692
1449	John Paston I	37	To an unidentified person in London	622
1452	William Paston II	81	To John Paston I	378
1489	William Paston III	413	To John Paston III	640
1487-1493	Edmond Paston II	400	To John Paston III	656
1487-1495	John Paston III	390	To Lord Fitzwalter	194
1492	William Paston III	414	To John Paston III	641
1495	William Paston IV	421	To John Paston III	127
1500	John Paston III	391	To Richard Croft	380
1503	John Paston III	392	To William Paston III and Richard Lightfoote	353
TOTAL				6,028



Only autographed letters have been chosen disregarding those containing any piece of writing produced by clerks.

3. VARIABLES CONSIDERED

Either from the SAD viewpoint or from the hybrid origin one (see section 2), most studies have focused on the evolution of spelling⁵ until English is fixed (Wright, 2000; Rissanen, 2000). In the last years, however, the “standardization of a language encompasses not only its spelling system, but also its vocabulary and grammatical system” (Wright, 1999). The letters studied for this piece of research were written within a time span of seventy-eight years and throughout different generations whose identity is known. They were composed when the process of standardization of the English language was quite developed. Nevertheless, as this process was still under way, it is not infrequent to find texts which contain morphological variation.

Consequently, not only spelling, but also the lexicon and grammar must be examined in order to make any statements about the degree of standardization of a particular text. Basing upon Wright’s proposal (1999) we have selected a number of morphological variables. Such variables are the following:

INFINITIVE MARKERS

We will here consider two types of markers: endings and prepositions preceding. Within endings we will look for *-(e)n* (*defenden* in letter 3 (1425)), *-e* (such as *stonde* in letter 1 (1425)) and \emptyset (*be* in letter 2 (1425)) endings. As for preceding prepositions we will be interested in *for to* as in *for to dystroy* (letter 413 (1489)), *to* (*to amend* letter 37 (1449)), and *a* of which we have no cases in our samples.

PAST PARTICIPLE MARKERS.

Markers can precede or follow the participles. Thus, we will make a first division between those participles that take a prefix and those that do not. Inside the first group, the prefixes we will be considering are *y-*, *i-*, *a-*.

As for the possible endings, we will focus on the presence of *-n* (either *-yn* or *-en*) versus *-ne*: *writen* (letter 1),

⁵ This type of study is represented by the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English*

PRESENT INDICATIVE MARKERS

For 3rd person singular (the use of *-s*, *-th* or any other endings will be indicative of Standardization or lack of it): *namyth* (letter 2), *semys* (letter 400).

For 3rd person plural (in this case, the possible endings are *-n*, *-e*, *-th* or \emptyset): *seyn* (letter 1), *knowith* (letter 4), *thynke* (letter 400).

THIRD PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS

Opposition between *b-* (such as *hem*) pronouns and *th-* (such as *them*) pronouns for the 3rd person plural in subject function and consideration of object and possessive functions.

NEGATORS

The tendency to use [*ne* + verb + negator] will be considered “less standard” than other practices in which double negation is not so common.

ADVERB MARKERS

Choice between endings in *-ly* and *-lich(e)*: *vntrewely* (letter 2), *dayly* (letter 414).

As mentioned in section 3, devoted to the corpus, we have decided to choose some of the letters which were written at the beginning of fifteenth century and some of them which were closer to sixteenth century. In this way, it will be possible to see: if the language was standardized, if the language still had many dialectal words or if there is a movement from a non-standard to a standard language through the time span considered. The following section will provide us with data relative to this particular point.

4. ANALYSIS OF DATA

4.1. INFINITIVE MARKERS

In Modern English the infinitive is formed either preceded by the preposition *to* or without any preposition or suffix, a form which is known as bare infinitive. During the Middle English period, the infinitive is often used with preceding *to* or with *for to* and in Northern English and Scots *for till* (Mossé, 1987) even though the preposition *to* is already the one more frequently used at the end of that period (see table 3 below). It is also frequent to find the bare infinitive after tempo-



ral auxiliaries (*shall, will*) or modal auxiliaries and after a number of verbs such as *go, hear* or *think*. This form is also found in the accusative-with-infinitive construction. These possibilities are well represented in the corpus studied here.

- (2) I prey you shewe it to my lordys good lordshepe (letter 392);
- (3) for to geynsstonde suche persons as is abowtward for to destroy owre suffereyn lorde the Kyng (letter 413)
- (4) that it may please yow of your specyall grace to dyrect ought your lettres sygned wyth your hand (letter 390)

We have also found some examples of infinitives which are coordinated (by the conjunctions *or/and*). In this case, only the first infinitive is preceded by the preposition *to* as well as in Present-day English:

- (5) the seyd Jamys shall vpon the syght of your seyd wryghtyng delyver or cause to be delyverd (letter 390)
- (6) And thys to be fulfyllid and kept (letter 413)

But there are still some signs which reflect the French influence on the English language; that is the case of *t'endure*, a form present in one of the letters (n^o 390) where we can appreciate the vocalic contraction between the preposition and the verb.

TABLE 2. INFINITIVE PREFIXES

INFINITIVE PREFIXES	FOR TO	TO	TO- FORMS IN %	OTHER FORMS IN %
	2	105	98	2

On the other hand, infinitives suffer the changes produced by the weakening of final vowels into /ə/ and the loss of final *-n* (García García, 2001). This process spread in early Modern English in such a way that both the infinitive and the first person singular of the present indicative came to share the same form (Moskowich, 2001).

In the corpus under study, just 2% of the infinitives have the older *-n* suffix. This tendency is followed by all authors and the only three tokens we have found are one in letter 3 (1425) and two in letter 37 (1449), both written in the first half of the fifteenth century. The weak verb *have* takes different forms in different tenses throughout the texts analysed, but we want to mention the presence of some apocopated forms. In the Northern dialect some verbs frequently used had apocopated forms (Mossé, 1987); *have* is one of these verbs and in the case of the texts analysed we have found two letters which show some examples of these forms (letter 81: *pat ðe schuld a be on of þe capetayns of þe ryseser in Norfolk (...) schuld an vtteryd ferthere*; letter 421: *all the comun shuld a be takyn a-way*). Table 3 below represents the distribution of infinitive endings in our corpus.



TABLE 3. INFINITIVE SUFFIXES

INFINITIVE SUFFIXES	-EN	-E	Ø	-N FORMS IN %	NON -N FORMS IN %
278	4	206	69	2	98

4.2. PAST PARTICIPLE MARKERS

In the Middle English period the prefix *ge-*, used in Old English for the formation of the past participle, had reduced to *i-/y-* until it finally disappeared. In fact, none of the men writing these letters have used this residual past participle prefix, a fact that could be considered as an example of a clear sign of the standardization in progress.

On the other hand, we cannot forget the tendency to rely on Latin categories as well as on its structures which was followed by most grammarians at that time. This conception of the English grammar was still in use during the fifteenth century and it lasted until after the Civil War (Görlach, 1993). The influence of this latinization can be observed in some of the letters considered, as it is the case of the form *apostata* (letter 4).

Apart from these considerations, the number of weak verbs (113) is higher than that of strong ones (37), as could be expected, since this group of verbs became the productive class (Mitchell, 2001). Among the weak verb forms we find an important number of past participles whose ending is already the form used in Modern English (letter 2: *told, sent*; letter 400: *made, thought*). Aside from these cases, the ending chosen by most of the letters' authors is the dental suffix *-d* preceded by either *-i* or *-y* instead of *-e* (letter 37: *portrayid, informyd*; letter 400: *shewyd, causyd*).

The presence of *-y* instead of *-e* before *-n* (letter 392: *vntakyn*, letter 400: *brokyn*) in the strong past participles ending is also present in our corpus and its frequency is quite high. Finally, the ending most often used for the strong past participles is the *-n* or *-yn* suffix.

After these considerations, the results achieved show that, even though we cannot still state that the standardization of the past participle forms is completed at this point, there is no doubt that there is a high degree of regularisation. As table 4 illustrates, there seems to be no difference in the selection of the different alternatives for the past participle formation, either for the weak or the strong forms, between the letters written during the first half of the fifteenth century and those written closer to the sixteenth century, at least in the group of letters we have considered.

TABLE 4. STRONG PAST PARTICIPLE SUFFIXES

PAST PARTICIPLES	-N	-N (E)	Ø	-YN	-E	-N FORMS IN %	NON -N FORMS IN %
Strong: 37	12	0	9	12	4	65	35

4.3. THIRD PERSON SINGULAR MARKER

This feature (the way in which the third person singular of the present indicative is expressed) is not really determining to reach any conclusion about its degree of standardization, at least in the group of texts analysed. The results in table 5 show that only five forms contain the *-s* ending and they are all written by a single author (Edmond Paston II) in a single letter (letter 400, written between 1487 and 1493: *semys* (3 times); *makys*; *seruys*). In this letter we also find the form *hasse* which is not, obviously, the standardized verb form for the third person singular of *have* in the present indicative, though it is closer to the form we find in present-day English than *hath*, variable found in this corpus (letter 3, written in 1425 by the Paston pater familias, William Paston I).

In addition to this, if we reconsider the *-s* forms found in the corpus and their relevance, we cannot establish whether these five forms represent a turning point; but the time span during which the letter is supposed to have been written (between 1487-1493) can be really significant, as it is closer to the following century and it is possible that Edmond Paston II was conscious of the current changes⁶ in language. This makes us think about an apparent movement towards the standard.

TABLE 5. THIRD PERSON SINGULAR MARKER

PRESENT TENSE	-TH	-S	-TH MARKERS IN %	-S MARKERS IN %
29	24	5	83	17

4.4. THIRD PERSON PLURAL MARKER

The number of these forms recorded in our sample is very low, even less than in the case of the third person singular. Among the eighteen forms just one shows the *-th* ending, seven contain an *-n* and 9 a final *-e*. There is one further point that deserves comment: the fact that the \emptyset -form we have in present-day English is not represented at all. All these figures are displayed in table 6 below.

⁶ In May 1469, Edmond II was staying at Caister hoping to go to London to an inn of court or chancery (Davis, 1971). We do not know if he finally did it, but he spent most of his life moving all over the country and we know he lived, briefly, in London, so it is possible he learnt some of the linguistic changes in progress.



TABLE 6. THIRD PERSON PLURAL MARKER						
PRESENT TENSE	-N	-E	Ø	-TH	-TH MARKERS IN %	OTHER MARKERS IN %
17	7	9	0	1	6	94

4.5. THIRD PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS

After studying a group of guild certificates (dated between 1388/89) Wright (1999) maintains that the distribution of the pronouns for the third person plural was stable in London at the end of the fourteenth century, as the texts show *they* forms in subject position, *hem* forms in object position, and *here* forms in possessive position.

The Paston letters we analyse present *they* forms in subject position, except in one case where we have found the alternative spelling *pey* (letter 37). The standardized form has been found in three letters (n^{er} 413, 414, 421) written between 1487 and 1495, while *pey* appears in a letter written a little earlier, about 1449. We can think, then, that the standard form was in current use in the late fifteenth century.

In object position we have *hem* (four times), *theym* (three times) and *them* (five times). The form *hem* appears in letters 1, 2 and 4 written in 1425 by William Paston I, who seems to prefer the older forms (Montoya, 2001); *theym* is recorded in two letters (n^{er} 391, 392) from 1500 and 1503 written by John Paston III. Considering these counts we could think there is no consistent movement towards the standardized word. But the standard form is also used in three letters written by two different hands, Edmond Paston II and William Paston III (who also uses *they*), between 1487 and 1493. With these results, it is possible to think that William Paston I did not use the standard form as the old ones were still in use. It is more difficult to explain why John Paston III did not use the standard form while his two brothers, Edmond Paston II and William Paston III did. Therefore, a more detailed study about his letters is necessary to come to any conclusion about his linguistic choices.

The forms in possessive position are not completely standardized, although a change in their use can be observed. Only William Paston I uses the older form *here*. The other tokens for present-day *their* recorded in our corpus are *ther*; so we can see a preference for a form which is closer to the standard than *here*.

TABLE 7 . PRONOUNS, THIRD PERSON PLURAL						
TOTAL PRONOUNS	SUBJECT FORMS		OBJECT FORMS		POSSESSIVE FORMS	
32	n. 5	%	n. 15	%	n. 12	%
	<i>They</i> (4)	80	<i>Hem</i> (4)	26,6	<i>Here</i> (1)	8
	<i>Pei</i> (1)	20	<i>Theym</i> (3)	20	<i>Ther</i> (11)	92
			<i>Them</i> (8)	53,4		

4.6. NEGATORS

The letters analysed show a significant consistency which moves towards the standard when the verb is needed in its negative form. We have also detected a generalised tendency to avoid the construction [*ne* + verb + neg]. The pattern observed is characterized by [verb + *not/nought*] and [verb + *no*] instead when the verb is followed by an adjective (letter 81: *I wryth no better*; letter 416: *I am as yet no bettyr horsyd than*). There are only two examples of [*ne* + negative adverb] (letter 2: *I was neuere somouned ne neuer hadde tydynge of þis matier (...) ne neuere hadde to do more*). The negative particle used by most of the Paston men is *not* in a post-verbal position. Only one of the men of the Paston family, William Paston I, uses *nought* as well as [*ne* + negative adverb]. There is another different form, *nowghte*, used once by John Paston III (letter 392), but it can be considered a linguistic reminiscence or dialectal form, since he uses later on *not* three times instead of *nowghte* in the same letter.

The negative particle is used with full, auxiliary and modal verbs and it is not contracted but on two occasions (letter 416: *I canot; whyche dednott*). The auxiliary verbs are not still used by any of the Paston members considered, even when they use the imperative mood (letter 37: *but let him not wete of þe mater atwix my modir and him*).

To sum up, there seems to be a progressive homogeneity towards an overall pattern determined by the selection of *not*, which is the form we have today.

TABLE 8. NEGATIVE PARTICLES

NEGATIVE PARTICLES	<i>NOT</i>	<i>NOUGHT</i>	<i>NOWGHTE</i>	<i>NE</i>	<i>NOT</i> IN %	OTHER PARTICLES IN %
40	30	7	1	2	75	25

4.7. ADVERB MARKERS AS A RATIO OF *-LY* MARKERS TO *-LICH(E)* MARKERS

The choice of adverb endings (between the two under consideration here) is evident in this particular case: the tokens for the *-ly* ending amount to 34 and in what refers to the *-lich(e)* ending, it does not appear. There is only one form which does not end in *-ly* but in *-lye* (letter 390: *daylye*), apart from this spelling variant, the rest of adverbs end in *-ly*, as we have just mentioned. There is, therefore, a clear preference for the modern suffix instead of the old Southern form. Considering this evidence, we can gather that all the members of the Paston family examined made the same choice and in consequence, we can talk about the existence of a standardized pattern which is present in the speech of different generations. This can be considered a sign of the consistency that language is achieving.



5. CONCLUSIONS

Since some degree of linguistic innovation seems to be present in the samples under study we could say that there is a clear tendency to use Standard English from what Samuels (1989) calls Post-Middle English Period onwards.

However, such innovation is not observed at the same pace in all the texts nor does it appear in all the morphemic units studied. The letters analysed reflect the existence of a morphological consistency mainly in the case of infinitives —which appear preceded by *to* and without final suffixes most of the time— the use of the negative particle *not* and the absence of double negatives in the verb phrase. Adverbs ending in *-ly* are clearly preferred to those ending in *-lich(e)*.

But variation is still typical of manuscripts at this time, even more if we consider that the Paston family's original language was quite regional (Norfolk dialect). We know most of the men in this family moved all over the country and got in touch with very influential personalities and court members such as the Duke of Norfolk, the Duke of Gloucester or the Earl of Oxford. So it may be that this variation is due, in part, to their constant travels.

On the other hand, the abandonment of some older forms in favour of the standardized ones is really significant. Such is the case of William Paston I, who used *h-* forms for the third person plural personal pronouns or *ne/nought* to express negation. Other members of the family (the sons and grandsons of the man just mentioned) did not use either *ne* or two negative particles. Instead they show a clear preference for the use of *not* close to the verb. Thus, we can state that these examples are an evidence of the progressive movement towards the standard language, even though a more detailed analysis of a higher number of written documents belonging to this family should be necessary.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that these letters (and other papers not considered here) are personal. This means that the type of content found in them is not necessarily homogeneous. Some of these texts are formal, as they are addressed to businessmen, lawyers, men at court, etc while others are more informal, this is the case of the letters sent to other members of the same family. As a consequence of this, the variation found can be explained to some extent by considering the type of register used. However, the size of this corpus does not allow us to reach concluding results. These considerations lead us to suggest that the variation present in the thirteen letters analysed, written by seven different hands belonging to the Paston family, expresses the traces of a language with regional influences which progressively abandons them in favour of the standard forms we know today.



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