

‘What’s done can’t be undone’: Verbal Contractions in Modern English

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The habit of contracting words originates in the intrinsic tendency of languages to assimilate the pronunciation of two neighbouring sounds. In Present-day English, this phenomenon is most plainly observed in the so-called ‘telescoped phrases’, a term that refers to all those cases of elision affecting auxiliary verbs, as exemplified by *it’s* and *doesn’t* (Peters, 2004, p. 126). Among these, there are, on the one hand, the contractions featured in operators, i.e., “the larger class containing the NICE [i.e. negation, inversion, code and emphasis] verbs in *all* their uses” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 104n, our emphasis). In these cases, the element contracted is a verb, either in its functional or lexical uses, and the elision takes place at the beginning of the word, as in *it’s* for *it is* or *they’ve* for *they have*. On the other hand, the negative adverb *not* may also be contracted to *n’t* when it modifies an operator, thereby losing its mid-word vowel and its free-word status in the process. The examples *doesn’t* for *does not* and *isn’t* for *is not* illustrate this phenomenon, with the exception of the negative modal *can’t*, which stands for the univocal full form *cannot*. Today, contractions are typically employed in colloquial registers, whether they be spoken or written. However, it remains unclear when these structures first became widespread in the language and how they became an index of informal English.

The present paper thus puts forward a corpus-based study on contractions that has been conceived as a register analysis of the phenomenon. The study is then concerned with the standardisation of the contractions in the period 1600-1999 and pursues the following objectives: a) to study the development of these structures over time, assessing their origin and spread in English; b) to analyse their distribution across registers and gender; and c) to consider the factors which may have participated in the informality of the constructions in Present-day English. For those purposes, the analysis explores the instances of contraction of the auxiliary and lexical verbs *be* and *have* and of the modal auxiliaries *will* and *would*, as well as the shortened forms of the negative particle *not* in *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* or *ARCHER* 3.2. The preliminary analysis of the data points to a wider distribution of the phenomenon in colloquial registers since their inceptio, which, more importantly, seems to be a result of the pull exercised by female authors in the overall dissemination of the structure. The considerable rise of the contractions from the 1900s onwards, which in itself was a critical point for the acquisition of civil rights on the part of women, possibly answers to the overall democratisation of the language taking place in the 20th century.

References

A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers (ARCHER) 3.2. 1990-2013. Originally compiled under the supervision of Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan at Northern Arizona University and University of Southern California; modified and expanded by subsequent members of a consortium of universities. Current member universities are Northern Arizona, Southern California, Freiburg, Heidelberg,

Helsinki, Uppsala, Michigan, Manchester, Lancaster, Bamberg, Zurich, Trier,
Santiago de Compostela and Leicester.
<https://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/archer/>.
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Language*. Cambridge University Press.
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