REVIEWS


Reviewed by Graham Williams, University of Sheffield

One might say that Renaissance English has over the last few decades been undergoing something of a renaissance of its own, particularly in the study of language and linguistics (for a recent survey of work on letter writing alone, see Del Lungo Camiciotti 2014). The creation and use of the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), beginning in the 1990s, unquestionably marked a new phase in the historical study of language and acted as the main catalyst in legitimising the field of historical variationist sociolinguistics that Mel Evans takes as a point of departure (in particular, see the ground-breaking Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). Yet, as E’s study proves, the range of analysis and the questions that may fruitfully be brought to bear on what might be termed the sociolinguistics of writing (see Lillis 2013) very clearly have yet to be exhausted from the historical perspective. Indeed, after reading E’s study, I am left with the impression that some of the most interesting work has only just begun. In particular, while most of the previous linguistically orientated monographs approach language from a predominantly quantitative perspective, now is the time for analyses that put individual language users back in the picture. Whereas we continue to gain a clearer picture of the diffusion of macro-level changes in Early Modern English (a period we now know was ripe with change) and of the possible role of social variables therein, the actuation, or why, of individual variation in context remains for the most part an open question, as does how this informs our appreciation of macro-level trends.

This monograph study of the correspondence, speeches, and translations of Queen Elizabeth I goes some way toward addressing this and other questions. Furthermore, E’s study is one of the first to explore multiple genres of writing in order to inform our picture of individual language users—this is an advantage of investigating one of the few women for whom writing survives across genres. The study is split into three clear sections: Part 1 outlines the study’s point(s) of departure and the corpora and methods used to address its research questions; Part 2, ‘Results and analysis’, presents the data and interpretation for ten well-chosen linguistic variables; and Part 3, ‘Research questions’, revisits the research questions in light of the analyses, drawing out the larger threads to have emerged in the course of the individual analyses in Part 2.

Part 1 begins by introducing the study’s cross-disciplinary approach and the key questions involved. At the outset E convincingly juxtaposes an undeniably widespread perennial interest in Elizabeth I’s legacy (i.e. her historical celebrity) with a general lack (both popular and academic, for the most part) of engagement with the key materials needed to reconstruct a more ‘authentic’ portrait of the queen as figured across genres of her own writing. New and refreshing here is E’s immediate engagement with the concept of idiolect and its relationship to the more common corpus-based variationist approach that has come to dominate this type of historical research over the last few decades. E’s central thesis is that ‘the idiolectal data … will capture the intersection between social identity and linguistic meaning, and thus offer a new window from which to perceive and understand Elizabeth’s sociolinguistic position in sixteenth-century society’ (2). Within this general rubric, her questions for the book are threefold: (i) Does Elizabeth’s idiolect change in response to her accession? (ii) Can a sociolinguistic analysis of Elizabeth’s idiolect provide a useful means for assessing authorship? and (iii) What can idiolectal analysis contribute to historical sociolinguistics?

To address these questions, E’s methodology balances close reading with quantitative analysis in a comparative framework. For the idiolectal material, E compiled her own electronic Queen Elizabeth I Corpus (QEIC) using original manuscript sources and recent edited collections. Com-
prised of correspondence, speeches, and translations, the 78,000-word corpus covers the period 1544–1603 and is subcategorized into pre- and post-accession works. In order to facilitate computational concordancing, the corpus has been modernized for spelling and punctuation (however, E also has a QEI Spelling Corpus for the orthographic analysis covered in Ch. 13, pp. 160–90). For the purposes of Early Modern English, the most obvious source for macro-level sociolinguistic data is the CEEC (2.7 million words), and the only slightly smaller (2.2 million words), but freely available, Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence (PCEEC) is used for comparative analysis throughout. In this way E positions Elizabeth’s overall usage within the context of previous research using the CEEC, and of her own searches using the PCEEC and QEIC. Following this initial macro-contextualization, E outlines the comprehensive range of factors she uses in investigating Elizabeth’s idiolectal variation, namely: (i) social factors, such as age, provenance, social rank, and level of education; (ii) interactive factors, that is, register or the social context of linguistic performance; (iii) stylistic factors, particularly related to genre; and (iv) systemic factors having to do with any possible linguistic-internal conditions of variation.

E’s selection of linguistic features to be analyzed in Part 2 is in part based on her comparative methodology. Features were first derived from Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s (2003) variationist study of fourteen morphosyntactic features in Early Modern English (discussed there in relation to time, gender, social stratification, and region). Part 1 makes clear the rationale for the final selection of the following variables known to have particularly been in flux in the early modern period: affirmative do, negative declarative do, ye/you, second-person possessive determiners, multiple vs. single negation, relative who/which, and the which/which. Additionally, superlative adjectives and royal we (and other self-referential pronouns) were selected due to their particular relevance to Elizabeth’s writing, and (as the study goes on to show) have clearly demonstrable relationships to the accession. An ‘experimental analysis of Elizabeth’s spelling’, which serves to augment lines of interpretation suggested later in Part 3, follows the analyses of the linguistic variables. It is described as ‘experimental’ because orthography has not previously been accounted for in sociolinguistics, and E’s methods in this section differ somewhat from those previous (see §13.2, pp. 165–66).

The sheer amount of detail synthesized by this study is most impressive, as is the application of linguistic, historical, and textual knowledge to the features discussed in Part 2. Each linguistic feature is presented in the macro-context of Early Modern English (again, using the CEEC) and then systematically broken according to E’s four groups of factors. And while the dynamics of some features are more clearly associable with particular factors than others, each study is well worth the effort. I discuss two very briefly here: affirmative do and royal we.

Affirmative do is frequently characterized as ‘one of the most intriguing questions in the history of English syntax’ (Rissanen 1999:239), and it is one of the great enigmas of Early Modern English in particular. As a macro trend, we know that affirmative do both rises and falls within the early modern period, and E’s QEIC data demonstrates that Elizabeth was a leader of both changes in her lifetime, in the pre- and post-accession periods, respectively. What is most fascinating here, and is possible only in the idiolectal context of a study like this, is the way E links Elizabeth’s changing usage with stylistic concerns and her exposure to multiple types of writing genres (translations figure prominently) in the pre- and post-accession periods. One larger question that came up for me concerned the extent to which linguistic leadership is related to hypercorrection, particularly as the latter may be linked to the ‘stylistic sensitivity’ that seems integral to the rise and fall of affirmative do, according to E’s account. Indeed, since such a question may be engaged at multiple points in the results and analyses, there is a whole section devoted to it in the final chapter of the book (§16.6, pp. 219–20), which in turn contributes to wider discussions having to do with sociolinguistics and mechanisms of change in the history of English.

Any study of monarchical language is dogged by questions of social profiling and singularity—and, indeed, E engages with this explicitly in her discussion of the gender question, in which we must ask: ‘Was Elizabeth by way of her position an honorary male?’ (see especially §14.1, pp. 195–97). Relatedly, E also discusses linguistic variables specific to Elizabeth’s station, namely royal we. Pragmaticists in particular should delight in this discussion, especially since this feature
of historical usage has received so little attention in the past; and in this sense E’s background to royal we is just as interesting as her results. In terms of its place in Elizabeth’s repertoire, it is clear that an understanding of royal we is crucial in appreciating the relationship between linguistic identity and sociopolitical ideology, interactional pragmatics, and the way that Elizabeth exploited this unique aspect of her linguistic repertoire to communicative effect.

One of the structural strengths of this study is that the original research questions outlined in Part 1 build momentum in Part 2 before being dealt with at some length in Part 3. I have noted some of the larger threads tackled here by E, but it is also worth mentioning the fascinating case studies in Ch. 15 (198–208), which she uses to readdress the question of authorship for problematic texts in the Elizabethan canon (including letters, the 1576 parliamentary speech, and a 1597 prayer). And while the extent to which idiolectal data can or cannot support theories of authorship varies in each case, in all instances the historical forensic linguistics outlined here suggests exciting potential for countless other cases of questionable authorship.

In sum, this study of the idiolect of Elizabeth I delivers its aims, in particular showing that: (i) her idiolectal change was, to some extent, dependent upon her accession and seems to have influenced what we can say of gendered variation (although this study also shows that Elizabeth’s usage does not warrant overgeneralizations such as ‘honorary male’, at least from the linguistic perspective); (ii) idiolectal analysis can be applied to questions of historical authorship in a period when scribal variation was common; and (iii) the study of idiolect has significant implications for some of the big questions in historical sociolinguistics, for example, regarding language change in adulthood, linguistic leadership, communities of practice, and especially stylistic variation.

This monograph will be of interest to anyone with even a vague interest in Elizabeth’s language, and more generally for scholars working in the fields of historical sociolinguistics, stylistics, and pragmatics. It is precisely research such as this that demonstrates the power of linguistic analysis to shed new light on old questions, as well as to articulate new and exciting ones, even in areas frequently trod.

REFERENCES


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In the early days of generative grammar, grammars were seen as properties of languages, generating the sentences of Chinese or Chichewa, and speaker/listeners were idealized as products of homogeneous speech communities, knowing their language perfectly. Chomsky (1986) aban-