INTRODUCTION TO

Early Modern English

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1 Introduction

1.1 Synchronic and diachronic methods

The English language, like every living language, is continually changing. All texts dating from an earlier period illustrate this fact. These changes mean that every period needs its own particular description or grammar. It also means that this grammar must clearly define its object of description, e.g. the beginning and the end of the period, geographical and social components, uses of the language described, etc.

Shakespeare's, Ben Jonson's, Milton's and Dryden's works as well as the Authorized Version (AV) of the Bible of 1611 were originally written in EModE, but they are also part of PrE. They belong to the PrE system in that they form part of the passive competence of present-day speakers. Such 'diachrony in synchrony', however, is never complete and brings with it problems of description.

The orthography and punctuation of EModE texts are normally adapted to suit present-day needs; pronunciation of the original texts, whether delivered on the stage or from the pulpit, is modern. However, the syntax remains more or less as in the original and except in some highly Latinized texts, it does not cause serious problems of comprehension. Such texts can, of course, sound artificial and odd, or even seem to the modern ear to contain mistakes.

Problems are most evident as regards the lexis. For simple contexts which are intelligible without the aid of a dictionary, a translation from the archaic register is still necessary: the AV's "with a girdle of a skin about his loines" (Mark 1.6), for example, is translated in the New English Bible (NEB) as "with a leather

belt round his waist". Other passages remain unintelligible or cause predictable misunderstandings. Thus Hamlet's "Thus Conscience does make Cowards of vs all" (*Hamlet* II.1.83) is problematic: *does make* is likely to be misunderstood as an emphatic use and the sense of *conscience* that Shakespeare intended cannot be understood from its PrE meaning.

These few examples will be sufficient to show that EModE cannot be satisfactorily described as a subsystem of PrE, but needs a separate description that is based on the structures of EModE itself. Moreover, the archaic function that some EModE texts have in PrE makes us aware of the possibility that there were similarly archaic registers in EModE.

1.2 Model of grammar

A synchronic description of EModE can be attempted in various ways. It would be ideal if we could describe the linguistic competence of a speaker of EModE and the change in English as a change in linguistic competence. But such a grammar would necessarily be defective as it would lack one central prerequisite: there is no speaker of EModE who could decide on the grammaticality and acceptability of new, not yet attested utterances generated by such a grammar. Also there is the problem of the very conspicuous variation apparent in EModE and in view of the unsolved problems of description of PrE varieties in transformational grammars, I do not see much sense in attempting a variety grammar of this type for EModE.

It would seem much better to describe EModE in a way that combines functional structuralism, as developed by such scholars as Martinet and the Prague linguists, with methods and insights of modern sociolinguistics. Even then we are, of course, restricted by the limitations of the sources, although EModE is comparatively well documented.

1.3 Sources

1 There is a wealth of texts available on which a grammar of EModE can be based. But any grammar deriving from these texts will not be more than a grammar of the texts described, and not a

complete grammar of EModE. It is uncertain whether, and how far, a modern linguist is entitled to claim to have found mistakes in historical texts and then to correct them, or whether every single document of the period ought to have more authority than the insight of a modern linguist. Statistical data are a dubious basis on which to judge grammaticality – but even statistics are not normally available for EModE.

(a) This rather shaky basis is reduced even further by gaps among the texts that have come down to us. Although printed texts of the period were more likely to survive than, for instance, medieval manuscripts, we do know of lost literature of the time. No copy of the first seven editions of Deloney's *Jack of Newbury* is extant, and many plays are only known as titles in Henslowe's *Diary*. Texts which survive in manuscript form and were first printed as late as the nineteenth or twentieth century include texts of both linguistic and literary importance, such as Nisbet's 'translation' of the Wyclif Bible into Scots (t7), Cheke's partial translation of the Gospels, Hart's *The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of our Inglish Toung . . .*, or Sidney's original version of *Arcadia*. Even more likely to have been lost, of course, are personal documents such as letters or diaries, which were often discarded after they had served their function. Since these types of texts were least susceptible to standardizing influences, they bear important witness to variation in EModE.

(b) The homogeneity of the written language, or rather of the printed texts of the period, has left little trace of the variation that is certain to have existed in the spoken language. Where dialectal utterances are found in print, in plays or pastoral lyrics, they are stylized and idealized as part of a literary convention, and the same is true of the portrayal of colloquial speech or the language of the lower classes in contemporary plays.

(c) The doubtful originality of texts adds further problems. Printed texts only occasionally reflect the uncontaminated idiolect of their authors. Even written texts such as letters or diaries were often copied by secretaries or exist only in later copies. Shakespeare's plays may serve as a very impressive example of what could happen in the course of a play's textual history. Manuscripts owned by the players or texts copied during performances often served as the basis for early editions. The folio edition (1623, T31A–F) is based on manuscripts which were carefully checked by players. This text was later printed by at

least five compositors, of whom A "albeit he sometimes misread his copy, was on the whole very faithful to it", B "took all manner of liberties", and E "though he tried hard, (...) succeeded badly" (Hinman 1968: xviii), and finally the text was corrected with varying degrees of care. The author's original text is therefore doubtful in many places and even very careful textual criticism cannot guarantee to reconstruct it in many cases.

2 Dictionaries provide information about the vocabulary and meanings of words; before 1604 the only dictionaries were bilingual, most of them Latin–English.

3 Statements by grammarians are valuable sources for linguistic structures *and* attitudes. Intensive study of the English language started in the Renaissance period. This study was partly prompted by comparison with Latin and the resulting impression was that English lacked order, a full vocabulary and stylistic elegance (2.9). In the sixteenth century grammarians concentrated on problems of orthography and its reform (3.5) and on the lexicon (7.3). The value of such statements varies. The following factors must be taken into account if one wishes to arrive at an objective evaluation:

(a)   provenance, life, social class and age of the individual gram-marian, whose status may vary from that of a naive describer to that of a scholar basing his work on a particular linguistic theory;
(b)   aim of the grammar (descriptive or – more likely – normative?);
(c)   dependence upon a particular tradition: how strong is the influence of Latin grammar?
(d)   the commonly conservative attitude of sixteenth-century grammarians.

All this means that we must expect gaps or doubtful judgements in the description, such as in the case of the pronunciation of homophones whose sounds are perceived as different only because the spelling differs; or the description, following the Latin pattern, of case and tense forms which may be non-existent in English (5.2.1). On the other hand, grammarians tended to overlook English categories which had no counterpart in Latin, such as the emerging category of aspect and the function of auxiliary *do* (6.5.6, 6.6).

4 The opinions of poets, critics and antiquaries reflect how the norms of correctness were interpreted. As shown in texts T1–T34, the wealth and variety of statements on the EModE language is considerable. However, we must not forget that most views are in some sense biased and must be carefully interpreted in their individual contexts. Moreover, the levels of grammar are very unevenly represented – there is much on the lexicon, a certain amount on pronunciation, but very little on syntax; also, almost all comments are concerned with the emerging standard form of EModE.

1.4 Cultural background

The gaps mentioned above are also found in other disciplines dealing with the period between 1500 and 1700. Historical geography, sociology, the history of religion, economic history and other areas can only provide some of the information that a sociolinguist working on present-day issues can easily obtain and use as a basis for empirical research. But even where documents from Early Modern times have been interpreted as required for the purposes of various disciplines, it is hardly possible for the individual scholar to have all this information at hand to apply to the linguistic data and thus interpret language use and change. Although we know from Labov's and other sociolinguists' research how linguistic variation can be described as patterned heterogeneity, there are considerable restrictions on the application of this procedure to language history before 1900.

One point, which is of special importance to the interpretation of linguistic data, can be regarded as representative of the problem as a whole.

1.5 Book production and literacy (Bennett 1952, 1965, 1970)

Cheap paper, the decreasing use of Latin and French, and growing interest in religious and encyclopaedic literature and also in light entertainment caused the production of books to rise dramatically in the early fifteenth century; yet the fact that every single copy had to be written out by hand limited the number of books. These works were chiefly religious or devotional manuals

for monasteries or a private readership, such as catechisms, Latin grammars or dictionaries, encyclopaedic writings on housekeeping, agriculture, hunting, medicine or English history and literature in the narrower sense, such as the works of Chaucer and Lydgate. Private reading increasingly replaced reading aloud and public lecturing.

The bulk of everyday literature remained the same in the sixteenth century. (This is even true of medical texts, which by and large did not take into account new discoveries but reflected the knowledge and the medical system of the late Middle Ages.) The continuing increase in English books on the popular sciences, on history and geography is quite remarkable. Besides this, there was also a very extensive literature available in translation, mostly from the French, and predominantly concerned with practical and devotional topics. Classical authors, especially complete works, were not normally translated in England (unlike France) before 1560–90 (cf. 7.4.2). The invention of printing by Caxton and its subsequent spread throughout England after 1476 meant a speedy increase in book production, which was accelerated by a rapidly growing literate public. In the *Short Title Catalogue* as printed between 1476 and 1640, 25,000 titles are listed, which is certainly more than all the titles produced in the preceding periods of the English language put together.

Little is known about the number of copies printed. In many cases it will have been limited to 100 copies. But a school-book like Lily's grammar sold up to 10,000 copies each year.

The number of literary works published depends on a great number of factors. In the late sixteenth century in particular, several favourable circumstances coincided:

(a) The expansion of grammar-school education meant that literacy was more widespread than ever before – a situation that was unparalleled until the nineteenth century.

(b) Numerous theatres and their audiences drawn from all social classes gave rise to a great number of new plays.

(c) The new sciences and the increasing interest in language, literature and rhetoric encouraged people to read books on these subjects.

(d) Numerous university graduates tried to earn a living from

writing if they were excluded from a government or ecclesiastical position.

It is impossible to determine exactly how many people were literate. There are only a few vague contemporary statements on this. The increasing number of printers and book titles serves as indirect evidence of the expanding market (1500: 54 titles, 1550: 214, 1640: 577), as does the foundation of a great number of grammar schools in the sixteenth century. Literacy appears to have reached a peak around 1600; it spread among members of the upper classes, including women, and even extended to the lower classes. Grammars and dictionaries from the early seventeenth century onwards were explicitly aimed at compensatory linguistic education, in particular of the young and of women (cf. t43).

In judging the impact that education had on the language of the time, it is important to stress how widely education was understood as a linguistic discipline. This explains the great influence of rhetoric and the delight in linguistic puns that is evident in contemporary drama. Linguistic education, which included education in English, was a very important precondition for social upward mobility.