

REVIEW

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ALCORN, R., J. KOPACZYK, B. LOS & B. MOLINEAUX (eds.) *Historical Dialectology in the Digital Age*, Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2019, 274 pp.

Historical Dialectology in the Digital Age, edited by Rhona Alcorn, Joanna Kopaczyk, Bettelou Los and Benjamin Molineaux, stands as a comprehensive survey of the intersection between historical linguistics and digital methodologies. This seminal work comprises eleven chapters which as Beal (2020) points out, most of them are based on papers originally presented at the First Angus McIntosh Centre Symposium on Historical Dialectology, held at the University of Edinburgh in June 2016. Drawing on the rich resources developed by the Institute of Historical Dialectology at the University of Edinburgh, including eLALME, LAEME, and LAOS, the book unveils the potential of digital tools to augment traditional methods in the study of historical dialects.

The book's content is structured into three distinct parts, each delving into specific aspects of historical dialectology. These segments intricately examine corpus-building strategies for regional manuscript data, offering insights into syntax, morphology, phonetics, and phonology. Furthermore, the chapters demonstrate how the geographical spread of linguistic features can enhance our understanding of historical text provenance, making a compelling case for the integration of digital tools in this nuanced field.

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The first chapter titled “Historical Dialectology and the Angus McIntosh Legacy” is written by the editors and concisely contextualizes the rest of the volume. It provides a helpful overview and introduction to the field of historical dialectology, with a focus on the study of medieval and Early Modern varieties of English and Scots. The authors begin by defining historical dialectology broadly as the study of diatopic, diachronic, and social variation in historical language varieties, constrained by the quality and quantity of available data. They then trace key milestones in the development of the field’s methodologies, highlighting the foundational work of the Edinburgh, Amsterdam, and Glasgow “schools” and their creation of major linguistic atlases for Old French, Middle Dutch, and late Middle English.

Several important principles and innovations are highlighted: the identification of diagnostic linguistic feature sets for regional comparison, understanding scribal copying practices, the “fit technique” for localizing texts, and semantico-grammatical tagging for exhaustive lexical surveys. The authors argue that digital methods have become essential for historical dialectology, enabling more robust cataloging, searching, visualization, and analysis of linguistic features across texts.

The second part of the chapter provides helpful overviews of the remaining chapters in the volume, which are organized around three themes: (a) creating and mining digital resources, (b) investigating segmental histories, and (c) contextual placement of features.

Overall, the authors demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the field’s history, guiding paradigms and principles, and cutting-edge digital developments. The roadmap provided for the remaining chapters is clear and helpful for orienting the reader. This would serve well as either an introduction to a published volume or as a stand-alone overview article for students and scholars interested in historical dialectology.

Part I entitled “Creating and Mining Digital Resources” includes three chapters. The opening chapter “A Parsed Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English” introduces an important new resource for the study of Middle English syntax. As described by the authors, Parsed Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (PLAEME) enriches the tagged text samples from the Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (LAEME) with syntactically

parsed representations in the format of the Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English (PPCHE).

After concisely explaining the utility of the consistent PPCHE format for historical syntax research, the authors highlight a critical gap in the PPCHE coverage during 1250-1350. They then demonstrate how the richly annotated LAEME texts are perfectly suited to bridge this gap after automatic parsing and manual error correction. The parsing procedure is explained in detail, as are the principles guiding the selection of texts for the initial PLAEME release.

The utility of PLAEME is then showcased through three illuminating case studies, examining the expression of negation, case marking and word order in ditransitives, and relative pronouns. In each domain, the PLAEME data provide a clearer picture of earlier stages of change and reduce the influence of outlier texts. The results suggest that some changes may have been more abrupt than previously realized.

Then, the authors address the limitations of the current PLAEME coverage and the potential influence of verse syntax. They present a reasonable method for assessing any verse effects using supplementary parsed verse corpora. The chapter concludes by highlighting promising directions for future expansion of this resource.

Overall, this is an important contribution that constructs an innovative new resource for Middle English scholarship and compellingly demonstrates its value. The chapter is clearly situated within the existing literature, and its focus on replicating and extending recent studies is particularly effective. Given the centrality of the PPCHE for syntactic research, PLAEME represents a major step forward in our understanding of this foundational period of English.

In the third chapter “Approaching Transition Scots from a Micro-perspective: The Dunfermline Corpus, 1573–1723”, Hofmann introduces a new electronic corpus, the Dunfermline Corpus, which allows for a micro-level sociolinguistic analysis of legal-administrative texts from the Scottish burgh of Dunfermline between 1573-1723. This period of “Transition Scots” has been understudied compared to earlier periods, but represents a dynamic contact situation between written Scots and Southern English varieties undergoing standardization. The chapter argues for recasting this as a meaningful period in its own right.

The Dunfermline Corpus contains c. 50,000 words across the idiolects of individual town clerks and scribes, conceptualized as a community of practice due to their social ties and shared institutional context. Extralinguistic evidence from the manuscripts is integrated to reconstruct biographical information and relationships between clerks. This micro-approach captures variation and change within scribal idiolects. Two pilot studies illustrate the corpus' functionality. The first traces five linguistic variables over time, showing localized resistance to anglicization except when networks were disrupted. The second examines past tense suffix variants, revealing structured internal variation and transitional forms. The corpus represents an initial effort to supplement LAOS by expanding into the early modern period. While still limited in scale, its sociolinguistic perspective and focus on idiolects offers new insights into an understudied but dynamic phase of Scots.

In the forth chapter, "Early Spelling Evidence for Scots L-vocalisation: A Corpus-based Approach", the authors investigate the timing, extent, and phonological conditioning of L-vocalisation (LV) in early Scots using corpus data from legal and administrative texts in the Linguistic Atlas of Older Scots (LAOS). Their corpus data indicates LV was still very minor in early Scots, challenging traditional accounts. A quantitative approach provides insights into the progress of changes missed in earlier scholarship.

Part II entitled "Segmental Histories" contains four chapters. "Old and Middle English Spellings for OE hw-, with Special Reference to the 'qu-' Type: In Celebration of LAEME, (e)LALME, LAOS and CoNE" as the fifth chapter of the volume surveys the wide array of 57 spellings for words with initial cluster hw- (originally PGmc *xw-) from OE to 1500, drawing on major historical corpora including LAEME, eLALME, LAOS, CoNE. These spellings imply phonological developments including lenition to [w], debuccalization to [h], possible fortition to [xw] or [kw], as well as orthographic influences. After taxonomic and geographical/chronological overviews, the chapter focuses on controversial "qu-" type spellings in ME, arguing based on alliterative and other evidence that these represented [kw] pronunciation. A CoNE-style narrative etymology traces the complex trajectories from IE *kw > PGmc *xw > OE [xw] > ME variants including [hw], [w], [h], [xw], [kw]. Interleaved are explanations of how these phonological developments interacted with orthographic changes over time.

The in-depth study showcases the interlinked historical linguistic resources developed in the tradition of Angus McIntosh's work, and illustrates how they can be used in combination for an integrated investigation of a phonological problem. The chapter emphasizes variationist perspectives, scribal practices, and idiolectal differentiation - all hallmarks of McIntosh's scholarly legacy. Diachronic changes are shown to be gradual, lexically diffuse, reversible, and intersecting with synchronic variation.

The next chapter titled "The Development of Old English æ: Middle English Spelling Evidence" provides a detailed examination of the development of the Old English vowels æ1 (from Proto-Germanic ai+i) and æ2 (from Proto-Germanic a) in Middle English, based on an analysis of spelling evidence from the Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (LAEME).

The author clearly outlines the complexities in interpreting Middle English spellings, noting that æ was retained in writing longer than traditionally assumed but decreased substantially after 1200, likely reflecting changes in pronunciation. Analysis of LAEME data reveals spellings with <e> greatly predominate for æ1 and æ2 in all areas, indicating raising had begun very early. Higher proportions of <a/æ/ea> spellings in early texts suggest raising continued through the period. The proposed East Saxon retraction of æ2 to [a:] is only supported by Essex spellings, not the wider territory suggested by previous scholars. Intriguingly, proportions of spellings differ for æ1 and æ2 even in West Saxon areas, perhaps indicating æ2 was phonetically closer. Statistical analysis confirms the spelling differences are significant, counter to claims they fully merged.

The chapter compellingly argues sound changes to æ1 and æ2, though predating the traditional Great Vowel Shift, overlapped and should be considered part of the prolonged period of vowel shifting in Middle English. Early vowel-shift spellings with <i/y> demonstrate æ raising was underway by the late 13th century.

In fact, this is a rigorous examination of a complex issue in Middle English phonology, using a substantial dataset to provide new insights into the development of Old English æ. The statistical analysis strengthens the conclusions, and consideration of

phonetic context and broader changes makes an important contribution to our understanding of these vowels.

In “The Development of Old English *eo/ēo* and the Systematicity of Middle English Spelling”, Stenroos examines the spelling of words containing Old English *eo/ēo* in Middle English texts from the 14th and 15th centuries. The main research questions are whether traces of a systematic distinction between the reflexes of Old English *e/ē* and *eo/ēo* can be found in this period, and if so, whether this reflects conservative spelling or the survival of distinct phonemes.

The author utilizes a corpus of Middle English texts covering 1325-1500, containing over 700,000 words. Two searches of the corpus are conducted - one looking at the spelling of 27 specific *eo/ēo* words, and another collecting all instances of <eo> spellings. The results show that while <e> spellings predominate overall, a subset of texts from the southwestern counties retain higher rates of <eo> spellings. In some texts over 50% of historical *eo/ēo* words retain <eo> spellings. The author argues that the high retention and lexical distribution of these spellings likely indicates they represent a spoken distinction, rather than just orthographic convention.

The chapter makes a valuable contribution by systematically examining a large corpus of late Middle English texts. The dual search methodology provides a nuanced perspective on the distribution and functions of <eo> spellings. The author makes a compelling case that <eo> retained a close relationship to a spoken rounded vowel in certain southwestern varieties of Middle English. She acknowledges the complex relationship between orthography and phonology, while marshaling the linguistic evidence to support her conclusions. Her argument that back-spellings alone do not prove mergers challenges common assumptions.

In terms of critical feedback, while the corpus approach is fruitful, a close analysis comparing the usage across a small set of manuscripts may reveal additional insights. The approximate dating of texts based on paleography could be supplemented by clearer manuscript evidence where available. Additionally, the phonetic realizations implied by the spelling evidence could be explored further. Overall, this is a thorough and insightful investigation of an intricate issue of Middle English historical linguistics.

In chapter Eight, “Examining the Evidence for Phonemic Affricates: Middle English */tʃ/*, */dʒ/* or *[t-]*, *[d-]*?”, Minkova provides an in-depth analysis of the development of

phonemic affricates in English, focusing on the change from stop-fricative sequences to contour segments /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. The author reviews evidence from Old English, Middle English, and Present Day English, examining relevant phonological processes such as palatalization, degemination, open syllable lengthening, and pre-cluster shortening. She makes effective use of metrical evidence from early ME verse to argue that affricates remained phonologically bisegmental sequences into late ME.

The chapter makes several valuable contributions. In analyzing OE and ME evidence, the author provides plausible phonetic explanations for orthographic conventions using <cg> and <ch>. She highlights the importance of considering cross-linguistic influence, citing Anglo-Norman affricate simplification as a model for variation in native English words. The author compellingly argues that variation between singleton and bisegmental realizations serves as a precursor to affrication. Her novel explanation of ME “palatal hardening” as [ʃ] ~ [tʃ] variation is insightful.

Part III titled “Placing Features in Context” includes three chapters. Smith in the ninth chapter, “The Predictability of {S} Abbreviation in Older Scots Manuscripts According to Stem-final Littera” examines abbreviation of the noun plural morpheme {S} in a corpus of Older Scots manuscripts. The author finds that use of the abbreviation symbol <ʃ> for {S} is primarily conditioned by the stem-final letter of the noun. Letters terminating in a horizontal stroke like <t>, <k>, <d> are much more likely to be followed by <ʃ> than letters ending in a downstroke or curve, like <m>, <n>, <l>. This suggests convenience in pen strokes, rather than representing a phonological distinction, motivates the abbreviation. The chapter applies statistical models to control for multiple variables and reveal these orthographic conditioning factors. In summary, it is an insightful quantitative study of scribal abbreviation practices using a unique diachronic corpus.

Chapter ten titled “An East Anglian Poem in a London Manuscript? The Date and Dialect of The Court of Love in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.19” re-examines “The Court of Love” a poem once erroneously attributed to Chaucer but demonstrably a neo-medieval fabrication, as Skeat convincingly argued, dating no earlier than the mid-16th century. This study offers a fresh assessment of both the poem’s composition and linguistic provenance. Firstly, the dating is refined, placing the text definitively

within the mid-15th century. Evidence for this revised chronology is drawn from internal linguistic features, particularly rhyme patterns and select orthographic choices, which point towards an East Anglian origin for the poet. Furthermore, an analysis of rhyme inconsistencies reveals discrepancies between the poet's intended rhyme scheme and the final, scribed version. These discrepancies suggest distinct linguistic profiles for the poet and the scribe, as further corroborated by metrical patterns and potential dialectal "relicts" preserved in the manuscript.

The East Anglian provenance of the poet and London origin of the scribe are further substantiated by data gleaned from online dialect atlases like eLALME. Notably, these resources shed light on specific syntactic constructions previously labeled as "false grammar" by Skeat, demonstrating their conformity with the poet's East Anglian dialect. Therefore, this chapter challenges previous misconceptions surrounding "The Court of Love," offering a more nuanced understanding of its authorship, linguistic heritage, and the complex textual interplay between poet and scribe. It is worth noting that Putter adeptly uses digital linguistic databases to contextualize forms and distributions, while also drawing on extensive previous scholarship. The chapter contributes valuable new evidence about the language of fifteenth-century literary texts and illuminates issues of scribal transmission and dialect mixture.

Overall, this erudite chapter compels readers to reconsider simplistic notions of "false" or "bad" grammar in analyzing the complex linguistic profile of this poem. Putter makes an important contribution both to our knowledge of Middle English dialects and to the study of textual transmission. His re-dating and localization of *The Court of Love* will necessitate revisions to our understanding of fifteenth-century English literature.

The final chapter, i.e. "He was a good hammer, was he": Gender as Marker for South-Western Dialects of English: A Corpus-based Study from a Diachronic Perspective", centers on the question whether the unique gender system in SW English dialects, characterized by the use of "he" for many inanimate count nouns, originated in early trends within Middle English. This chapter presents an insightful corpus-based study investigating the origins of the masculine default gender system in the traditional dialects of the English Southwest. The author clearly outlines the defining features of these dialects and provides a comprehensive overview of previous literature describing

the phenomenon of masculine pronouns used as general reference for most inanimate nouns. Guzmán-González argues convincingly that this feature likely does not originate in Middle English, contrary to some assumptions. The corpus analysis of over 250 units of anaphoric reference from localized medieval texts supports the prevalence of the neuter “it” for inanimate things, with very few exceptions. The author offers perceptive explanations grounded in semantic criteria for the nouns with animate pronoun references. In fact, the chapter makes an important contribution in tracing the history of gender assignment in English dialects. Guzmán-González demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between grammatical and natural gender systems in the transition from Old to Middle English. The corpus and methodology are clearly explained and appropriate. At the end, the author suggests insightful theoretical considerations for further research, situating the rise of Standard English as a pivotal development marking a crucial change in the character of textual evidence. It highlights the need to identify and contextualize regional features in texts potentially influenced by the spread of the standard language.

Overall, this is an original, well-researched study that advances our understanding of an interesting morphological phenomenon in English dialects. It illustrates adept use of textual evidence and both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The chapter engages thoroughly with relevant prior scholarship and points productively toward future investigation.

Through reviewing these chapters, which as Bossenbroek (2020) writes, differ widely in their contents, but are common in overarching theme of the use of digital tools and methods in the field of historical dialectology, we can conclude that digital tools have revolutionized dialect studies, transforming the field from dusty archives to vibrant landscapes of data and collaboration. Once, meticulous fieldwork and painstaking analysis defined the pursuit of understanding dialectal variation. Today, online databases and geolinguistic mapping tools allow researchers to collect, analyze, and visualize vast amounts of dialect data with unprecedented speed and precision.

These tools open doors to previously inaccessible areas, enabling researchers to study endangered dialects and document vanishing linguistic practices. They facilitate collaboration across borders and disciplines, fostering new research questions and

innovative analyses. However, challenges remain. At first, digital divides limit access for some participants, and the very tools that democratize research can amplify biases if not carefully used. Secondly, as Baily (2017) asserts, exploiting these new technologies requires appropriate mechanisms.

Professionally speaking, it can be concluded that each chapter contributes to the overarching exploration of linguistic features in regional varieties within historical texts. Drawing on the rich resources developed by the Institute of Historical Dialectology at the University of Edinburgh, including eLALME, LAEME, and LAOS, the book unveils the potential of digital tools to augment traditional methods in the study of historical dialects.

Ultimately, digital tools are not replacements for traditional dialect research methods, but powerful complements. They offer a broader lens through which to view linguistic diversity, revealing intricate patterns and connections once hidden in the shadows of traditional methods. As these tools continue to evolve, dialect studies stands poised for even greater discoveries, shaping our understanding of not only languages and dialects, but cultures and the human experiences.

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