
Social Networks in Pre-1500 Britain: Problems, Prospects, Examples*

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1. INTRODUCTION

'The forces operating to produce linguistic change today are of the same kind and order of magnitude as those which operated in the past five or ten thousand years'.¹ This claim, often referred to as the Principle of Uniformity, made by William Labov in *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, may have been primarily geared to structural, or 'internal' factors and mechanisms of language change, such as chain-shifts or the principle of unidirectionality. The question, however, is whether it also holds, to the same extent, for social, i.e. 'external', factors and mechanisms, such as power and solidarity phenomena or social networks. Lesley Milroy seems confident that 'since all speakers everywhere contract informal social relationships, the network concept is in principle capable of universal application'.² Does this automatically imply that network strength scales, tight versus close-knit networks and multiplex versus uniplex ties are relevant categories for the study of language at any stage in history? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the course of the present article.

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¹ William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 275.

² Lesley Milroy, *Language and Social Networks*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 178.

2. PROBLEMS: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL HISTORY

The representation of social networks is in principle based on mathematical graph-theory, i.e. they are represented in graphic form as follows. In personal or (ego-) focused networks there is one asterisk as focus (ego), in addition to which there are several dots, indicating individuals, which are represented in their relationships (lines) to ego. Relationships may be either first order, if the individual is directly linked to 'ego', or second order, if the individual is only 'a friend of a friend'. Several other components are added, both structural, such as density, centrality and the presence of clusters, and content (or interactional), such as multiplexity, transactional content and reciprocity. From a uniformitarian point of view, these two notions must be kept apart.

The basic component is obviously universally applicable. Anywhere and at any time, when two or more entities are in any kind of contact with each other, this relationship can be visualised by dots and lines as follows:

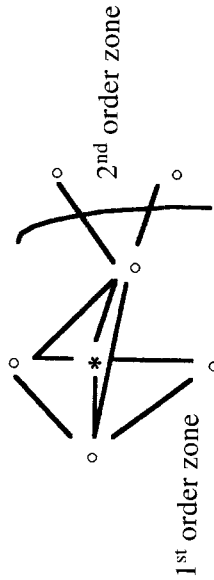


Fig. 1. The basic 'dots-and-lines' network model.

The additional structural components are also universally applicable, as they are derived from the basic component through mathematical procedures.³ These are inter-subjective and obey the PRINCIPLE OF UNIFORMITY, provided that sufficient data are available. The additional content factors, on the other hand, are not universally applicable, as they largely depend upon the analyst's notion of content or 'transaction'. There is no reason to believe that what we call a transaction today must necessarily be regarded as one at earlier stages in history, and vice versa. The fuss John Paston II (see below) made about some books that he wanted to inherit illustrates this point.⁴ While questions of inheritance are still

³ For some of these formulae, see Jeremy Boissevain, 'Social Network', in *Sociolinguistics/Sociolinguistik: An International Handbook of the Science of Language*, eds. Ulrich Ammon, Norbert Dittmar and Klaus J. Mattheier (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 164-9, and Lesley Milroy, *Language and Social Networks*, pp. 49-52.

⁴ See H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England. Studies in an Age of Transition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 112.

important today, the transactional content in these cases rarely involves books.

Multiplexity is another factor that depends upon transactional content or key relationships. Lesley Milroy, for instance, has concentrated upon 'the key relationships of kin, neighbourhood, occupation and voluntary association (friendship)'.⁵ Intuitively, these seem to be 'pretty universal' from an anthropological point of view. However, I believe that some caution at this point is required. It goes without saying that the problem of the definition of transactional content also applies to any of the other content factors, such as frequency and reciprocity. Thus, all content factors are more or less subjective and require more interpretation than any of the structural components, which are based on mathematical principles. Therefore, it is necessary to assume that social network analyses can obey the Principle of Uniformity at two different levels. The basic 'dots-and-lines model' and its structural components are theoretically applicable independently of time and space, as long as the amount of data is sufficient. The interactional components, however, are not universally applicable. These are specific, subjective criteria that have to be developed and evaluated for each particular situation in which they are to be applied.

In what follows, I shall present some pilot studies, in reverse chronological order - dealing with the Pastons, the Lollards and the Peterborough Chronicle - in order to explore the possibilities and prospects of social network analysis in sociolinguistic studies of the Middle English period.

3. LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

3.1. The language of the Pastons

During the Middle English (ME) period, the Old English (OE) relativising strategies were replaced by *that*, *which*, *who/whose/whom* and 'zero'.⁶ The combination of *se* and *þe* was lost at around 1100; *þe* survived until about 1250. Instead, the former neuter demonstrative *þat* (nominative and accusative singular) came into use as an uninflected relativiser for all persons and genera. *þat* was first introduced in the North and then gradually spread southwards, until it was by the thirteenth century more or less the only relative pronoun. During the early Middle English period the *wh*-series was in-

⁵ Lesley Milroy, *Language and Social Networks*, p. 52.

⁶ For an overview, see Olga Fischer, 'Syntax', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language. Vol II 1100-1476*, ed. Norman Blake (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 295-312, pp. 207 ff.

produced, though only gradually at first. *Who* took longest of all to enter the system; why this should be so is still 'one of the cruxes in the history of English syntax'.⁷ The language of the fifteenth-century Paston family, for example, shows a lot of variation in their relativisers:

(1) My modyr spak wyth old Banyard of Sibton Abbey for the same mater *and* he knew non **pat** wold pase vpon *be* mater at his desyir, but he asygnyd dyuers men **pat** loue not Jeney, **whyche** he kowd thyнк wold pase vpon it at yowr desyir if ye spak wyth hem youyrse-lue or at *be* lest iche of hem kowd get yow ij or iij men **that** wold sey as they wold in cas ye spak wyth hem youyr-selue, **whoys** namys I send yow in a byll by Loueday. (John III, Letter No. 322, ll. 43-9, emphasis added).⁸

A quantitative study of the Paston texts produced the following results:⁹

Table 1. Relative pronouns in the *Paston Letters*.

Relativiser	Total	%
<i>that</i>	1313	61.5%
<i>which</i>	609	28.5%
<i>the which</i>	80	3.8%
<i>who</i>	35	1.6%
<i>whose</i>	39	1.8%
<i>whom</i>	60	2.8%
Total	2136	100%

⁷ Mats Rydén, 'The Emergence of *Who* as Relativiser', *Studia Linguistica* 37 (1983), 126-34, p. 126. See also Suzanne Romaine, *Socio-historical Linguistics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 62.

⁸ All further citations are taken from *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

⁹ The Paston text collection consists of personal documents such as the letters, wills, and memoranda of the Paston family written during the years 1425-95. As edited by Davis in 1971 it consists of 421 documents with more than 245,000 words. The language of this family is of particular interest and importance for the study of the history of English, as this is one of the first cases where a lot of social as well as linguistic data are available. It has also been argued that the letters constitute some of the earliest written documents that contain representations of oral, 'natural' varieties of ME. In the present study only 'standard' anaphoric relative pronouns were counted, excluding *as*, *wherefor*, *what* and similar forms. Also, 'attributive relative pronouns' as in

(9) ... the wiff of your seid besechere at that tyme beyng ther-in, *and* xij persones with here, **the which persones** thei dreve oute of the seid mansion ... (John I, Letter No. 36, ll. 27ff, emphasis added)

were ignored, as in these cases only (*the*) *which* was possible, delimiting the range of variability; cf. Mats Rydén, *Relative Constructions in Early Sixteenth Century English* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1966), pp. 113-23, 145-9

That is, indeed, used in the majority of the cases (61.5%), followed by *which* (28.5%), while *who* (1.6%) is rarest of all. If the results are further subdivided and each family member is analysed individually, a slightly different picture emerges:

Table 2. Individual relativisation strategies of the Paston Family.

	<i>that</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>the which</i>	<i>who</i>	<i>whose</i>	<i>whom</i>	Total	Ratio
Agnes 1400?-1479	59.4% (38)	29.7% (19)	1.6% (1)	3.1% (2)	3.1% (2)	3.1% (2)	64	1.46
William I 1378-1444	60.0% (18)	23.3% (7)	3.3% (1)	3.3% (1)	6.6% (2)	3.3% (1)	30	1.50
William II 1436-1496	63.3% (69)	30.3% (33)	-	0.9% (1)	0.9% (1)	4.6% (5)	109	1.73
Edmond I 1425-1449	100% (2)	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Elizabeth 1429?-1488	21.1% (4)	42.1% (8)	21.1% (4)	5.3% (1)	-	10.5% (2)	19	0.26
Clement II 1442-1479?	75% (15)	10% (2)	15% (3)	-	-	-	20	3
John I 1421-1466	59.2% (158)	30.7% (82)	2.3% (6)	1.9% (5)	3.8% (10)	2.3% (6)	267	1.45
Margaret 1420?-1484	76.7% (503)	12.5% (82)	7.6% (50)	0.3% (2)	1.5% (10)	1.4% (9)	656	3.29
John II 1442-1479	51.6% (223)	44.9% (194)	-	0.9% (4)	1.4% (6)	1.2% (5)	432	1.07
John III 1444-1504	55.9% (233)	33.3% (139)	0.7% (3)	2.4% (10)	1.4% (6)	6.2% (26)	417	1.26
Margery 1455?-1495	45.8% (11)	29.2% (7)	25.0% (6)	-	-	-	24	0.85
Edmond II 1445?-1504	30.0% (12)	50.0% (20)	5% (2)	10% (4)	-	5% (2)	40	0.43
Walter 1456?-1479	54.5% (6)	36.4% (4)	9.1% (1)	-	-	-	11	1.2
William III 1459?-?	48.8% (21)	27.9% (12)	9.3% (4)	9.3% (4)	2.3% (1)	2.3% (1)	43	0.95
William IV 1479?-1554	-	-	-	-	50.0% (1)	50.0% (1)	2	-

Although the trend in Table 2 confirms what has been said so far about the developments in general, certain individuals seem more modern in their usage than others, even when belonging to the same generation. This is expressed in the factor **Ratio**, which gives the total number of *that* divided by the total number of *wh*-pronouns for each speaker. The lower this figure, the more *wh*-pronouns are used, showing the greatest advance in the process.

One caveat seems necessary, though. Some of the total occurrences in certain family members, such as Walter or Edmond I for instance, are far too few to allow any representative statements. Nevertheless, they may serve as illustrations of trends and are thus included in Table 2. The hypothesis to be tested now is whether innovative language use (small **Ratio**) correlates with a looseknit network structure.

One example of intergenerational differences can be found in the language of the two brothers of the second generation, John II and John III. Both are of about the same age: John II was born in 1442, John III in 1444. Their biographies, however, differ considerably.¹⁰ John II was knighted at coming of age, left home afterwards without his father's consent and travelled throughout Europe. He was often in trouble, monetary and otherwise, and meddled in international politics and the ranks of high society. He died in 1479. His brother John III, on the other hand, stayed mostly at home during his adolescent years, working as a secretary to their mother Margaret. Although he went to Bruges with John II in 1468 for Princess Margaret's marriage, he preferred to stay in or around Norwich, where he acted as MP and Justice of Peace for several years. He died in 1504. John III seems to have been more territorially bound than his brother, who probably had higher aspirations from early on. John II had connections with royal circles, John III with higher aristocracy 'only'. All this is reflected in their language. The traditional sociolinguistic parameters being equal, they differed in that John II, a travelling bon vivant with a vibrant social life,¹¹ was a member of several looseknit networks situated all over Europe, while John III, on the other hand, was a member of the 'local

¹⁰ See Davis's introduction to his edition of the letters, his article 'The Language of the Pastons', in *Middle English Literature: British Academy Gollancz Lectures*, ed. J.A. Burrow (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 45-70, and Bennett, *The Pastons and their England*.

¹¹ A comparable case may be found in Robert Cely, also the eldest son and 'a cause of concern for the family', who lived beyond his means (Helena Raumin-Brunberg and Terttu Nevalainen 'Like Father (Un)like Son: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Language of the Cely Family', in *Studies in Middle English Linguistics*, ed. Jacek Fisiak (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 489-511, p. 502). Strikingly, he also used innovative forms (*who*, *the* *which*) rather frequently

team' and was, therefore, bound up in a multiplex, tight network. The idea that the language of these two brothers reflects the similarities and differences in their lifestyles is confirmed by some of Davis's findings. He claims, for instance, that the language of some of the Paston brothers, particularly John II, but, presumably, also John III, changed considerably upon their coming to London.¹² In all these cases the change of place, i.e. migration, seems to have weakened (or at least changed) the network structure of the speakers.¹³ Furthermore, according to Davis, in or around 1467 the younger John shows a large number of new features: he uses *myght* (formerly *myt*, *myght* etc.), *-owght* (e.g. *thought* instead of *thowt*), *th*-pronouns (e.g. *them* instead of *hem*) for the first time or with higher frequency after this year. Davis speculates that there must have been new experiences in John's life (e.g. the visit to Bruges the following year; his father's death the year before; his wooing of Lady Boleyn's daughter),¹⁴ which marked some shift in his network structure and seem to have left their traces on his verbal behaviour.

But what about the other family members? While Clement II uses mostly *that*, his sister Elizabeth shows a similar preference for *wh*-pronouns. Again, one of the reasons for interpersonal variation in this case might be the existence of different social networks for the individual family members (while a family network represents only one cluster in a total network, other clusters within that network might influence their members differently). In addition, the variable gender may also have played a role here.¹⁵ Edmond II seems to be an innovator. While the rest of the family uses *who*, *whose*, and *whom* only in formulaic expressions with the deity as the antecedent such as

¹² 'But it must have been from London - no doubt from Londoners "off worship" - that he [John II] and some of his brothers learnt to adopt new forms and spellings [...] (Davis, 'The Language of the Pastons', p. 60).

¹³ Cf. Terttu Nevalainen's contribution to the present volume.

¹⁴ Davis, 'The Language of the Pastons', p. 57; cf. *Paston Letters and Papers*, p. lxix.

¹⁵ The male family members seem to prefer *wh*-pronouns (55.1% *that*, 44.9% *wh*-pronouns), while the women tend to prefer *that* (72.9% *that*, 27.1% *wh*-pronouns). This might principally be due to different social networks for men and women in the Middle Ages, since 'Gender' has also been established as an important sociolinguistic factor in Early Modern England; see Terttu Nevalainen, 'Gender difference', in *Sociolinguistics and Language History*, pp. 77-92. A detailed analysis, however, proves to be difficult, as many letters by female family members were not autographed, but dictated. The case is different with Elizabeth, anyway. With her marriages to Lord Poynings and Sir George Browne, she can be characterised as a social climber, who had strong motivations to leave her family behind - she was heavily mistreated by her mother, Agnes (*Paston Letters and Papers*, p. lvi). This might account for her very modern usage of *wh*-pronouns

- (2) . . . by the grace of God, whom I beseeche mak yow good. (John III, Letter No. 326, *Paston Letters*, I, 24),

Edmond sometimes uses them with human antecedents:

- (3) . . . he hathe seyð þat he woold lyfte whom þat hym please . . . (Edmond II, Letter No. 395, *Paston Letters*, II, 15–16)
- (4) . . . Mastyre Baley, who I wende woold not haue balkyd this pore loggeyng to Norwyche wardys. (Edmond II, Letter No. 399, *Paston Letters*, II, 11–13)

Only Margaret and John I also occasionally use *who/whose/whom* in this way, though proportionately far less frequently than Edmond II. Edmond II, like John II, was a traveller, who spent a lot of time in London and Calais, and he also took part in the 1468 marriage journey to Bruges. Moreover, he also had his disputes with the family. And although he was not as much involved in politics as his brothers, it seems reasonable to assume that he, too, had more weak ties than the rest of the family. His looseknit network then positively correlates with his innovative language use. Again, this idea is confirmed by Davis, who noted that Edmond uses fourteen *-s* forms in the present indicative (instead of *-th*), but only after 1471,¹⁶ following a two-year stay in London at Staple Inn, where he may have adopted this new form.

3.2. The language of the Lollards

Going back another century or so, I will now consider the writings of the Lollards, a religious sect of the fourteenth and early fifteenth century connected with the Oxford scholar John Wyclif (c. 1330–1384). The group put great effort into developing literacy and learning among its members and also in the religious reformation of the public.¹⁷ The Church, naturally, opposed this movement, and persecution soon set in. This, in turn, led to a situation where people learned to read secretly: underground reading circles were established, and those unable to learn to read at all employed people who read aloud for them.¹⁸ One of the best documented cases is the famous 'laicus litteratus' Walter Brut, who, being charged with the Lol-

¹⁶ Davis, 'The Language of the Pastons', p. 58.

¹⁷ Sabine Volk-Birke, 'Wycliffite Sermons: A Critical Commentary on Late 14th-Century England', *Proceedings of the Conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English*, Vol. XVII (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996), 297–311, pp. 303–4.

¹⁸ Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers. Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1984).

lard heresy, had to defend himself in court. He described himself as 'peccator, laycus, agricola, Cristianus, a Britonibus ex utraque parente originem habens'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he made his elaborate statements before the court in Latin. Historical analyses²⁰ have led to the assumption that '... Lollard communities were tightly knit and inward looking enclaves in a hostile world, with a learning that greatly depended upon memorizing by the rote'.²¹ Such a closeknit network must have greatly enforced a uniform language, which can be studied on the basis of the sermon cycle. About thirty manuscripts of this cycle are still in existence (the actual number in the fifteenth century must have been much higher, but many manuscripts were burnt by the Inquisition). Of these thirty manuscripts, twenty-seven share a lot of linguistic features in the broadest sense: not only do they have a common method and style of rubrication and layout, but also the syntax and lexicon are very similar. Apparently, all manuscripts were carefully corrected by one or more people – 'even to the extent of the omission or inclusion of the definite article'.²²

Unfortunately, however, a comprehensive study of Wycliffite language use is still a *desideratum*.²³ We have data on complementation patterns in the Wycliffite sermons,²⁴ Lollard vocabulary²⁵ and general (syntactic) style.²⁶ But either these studies do not employ sociolinguistic methods (as in the case of Warner), or they do not provide sufficient linguistic data (as in that of Hudson and Knapp) to be of much use to the present analysis.

¹⁹ 'Sinner, layman, farmer, Christian, having my origin from among the Britons from each parent', Anne Hudson, "'Laicus litteratus": The Paradox of Lollardy', in *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*, eds. Peter Biller & Anne Hudson (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 222–36, p. 222.

²⁰ See Anne Hudson, *Lollards and their Books* (London: Hambleton, 1985); Shannon McSheffrey *Gender and Heresy, Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995); Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, and elsewhere.

²¹ Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, p. 169; cf. Volk-Birke, 'Wycliffite Sermons', p. 310. A historical study that refers explicitly to social networks is McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, pp. 47, 66.

²² Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, p. 188.

²³ See Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, pp. 166, 176 (n. 3), and Matti Peikola 'On the Trail of a Lollard Discourse: Notes on the Relationship between Language Use and Identity in the Wycliffite Sect', in *Topics and Comments: Papers from the Discourse Project*, eds. S.-K. Tanskanen, S.-K. and B. Warvik, *Anglicana Turkuensia* 13 (1994), 75–88.

²⁴ Anthony Warner, *Complementation in Middle English and the Methodology of Historical Syntax* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

²⁵ Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, pp. 165–80.

²⁶ Peggy Knapp, *The Style of John Wyclif's English Sermons* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977) and Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Context* (London: Routledge, 1990).

Warner's data on infinitive marking are easiest to work with, since they are carefully presented. In Middle English, we principally find three different methods for marking infinitive complements: zero, *to*, and *for to*. All three are evident in the Wycliffite texts:²⁷

- (5) Muche more schulde we knowe ... (*Sermon* 34, p. 367, ll. 90–1)
 (6) And 3et Crist meueþ hise children to haue ioye ... (*Sermon* 53, p. 467, l. 92)
 (7) ... þat Crist 3af hem for to drynke. (*Sermon* 39, p. 640, l. 38).

As with the relative pronouns, all three types can be found more or less interchangeably in a very short passage of the text:

- (8) Poul techþ in þis epistele to **fy3te** wipoure goostli enemyes, and hou we **shulden be** goostli armed and in what foorme **fy3te** wip hem. First Poule counfortiþ Cristis kny3tis to **make** hem hardi **for to fy3te** ... (*Sermon* 51, p. 685, ll. 1–4, emphasis added).

While *for to* and *to* show complex distributional differences, zero marking is considerably restricted in use. Zero marking almost exclusively occurs in verb complementation, whereas *to* and *for to* can also be used in complements of nouns and adjectives, adverbial adjuncts, surface subjects or predicates. 'Thus the selection of infinitive marker is clearly both lexically and grammatically controlled'.²⁸ Moreover,

among the factors which correlate with stronger [i.e. non-zero] infinitive marking are (i) occurrence as an adjunct, (ii) separation of the infinitive from a conjunction, and perhaps (iii) fronting within the nonfinite clause. Separation from the matrix verb is of little importance, and occurrence in a purpose adjunct is of none.²⁹

²⁷ 'Wycliffite texts' in this case refers to a basic collection of Wycliffite writings, 'the standard sermon-cycle'. Cf. Anne Hudson, 'A Lollard Sermon-Cycle and its Implications', *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971), 142–56. Warner used the partially deficient edition of the cycle by Arnold (see Warner, *Complementation in Middle English*, p. 77; cf. Hudson, 'A Lollard Sermon-Cycle'; *Lollards and their Books*, pp. 181–2) with a detailed study of 60,000 words plus a less careful study of the rest. The present study takes its material from *English Wycliffite Sermons*, eds. Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983–96, 5 vols.), Vol. I, *Sermons on the Sunday Gospels and Epistles*.

²⁸ Warner, *Complementation in Middle English*, p. 116.

²⁹ Warner, *Complementation in Middle English*, p. 228.

Additionally, the rise of a category 'modal' that required zero-infinitive marking also played an important role.³⁰ But since I am concentrating on structural, not functional features I shall not enter into this discussion. What is important from a variationist point of view is the fact that the infinitive marker *for to* seems less common in the Wycliffite texts than in the Chaucer texts analysed by Randolph Quirk and Jan Svartvik.³¹ This is remarkable insofar as both studies deal with approximately the same period. Warner gives a ratio of 90:10 in favour of *to*, compared to 30:10 in Chaucer. Although these proportions of *for to* occur principally in every possible position and function, *for to* is clearly preferred in adverbial adjuncts – far more so than in the Chaucer texts.³² Separation from the matrix verb was found to be an important factor in Quirk and Svartvik's study, in contrast to the Wycliffite texts. Seen in isolation, these findings are not very exciting, but the fact that Chaucer was a single author while the Wycliffite writings were composed by several authors and copy-edited by several scribes must be reckoned with. After all, one would expect a larger degree of variation in a group of speakers than in a single author. It can be argued that the Wycliffite group developed a distinctive, perhaps even normative, language use that excluded *for to* in many of its functions. This distinctive style appears to have been made possible by the dense network structure of the group, and possibly by some kind of cultural focusing.³³

3.3. The language of the *Peterborough Chronicle*

In this section, we will go back another 200 years to the very beginnings of Middle English. One of the first Middle English documents is the Final Continuation of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 636. The scribe of the Final Continuation qualifies in every respect as a linguistic innovator in the Milroys' sense.³⁴ Betty Phillips shows that the scribe's spelling of various diphthongs is innovative;³⁵ he is, moreover,

³⁰ Warner, *Complementation in Middle English*, pp. 133, 223.

³¹ Randolph Quirk and Jan Svartvik, 'Types and Uses of Nonfinite Clauses in Chaucer', *English Studies* 51 (1970), 393–411.

³² Quirk and Svartvik, 'Types and Uses of Nonfinite Clauses in Chaucer', p. 399.

³³ Cf. Ursula Lenker's contribution to the present volume, section 4.3.

³⁴ James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 169; James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, 'Linguistic Change, Social Network and Speaker Innovation', *Journal of Linguistics* 21 (1985), 339–84.

³⁵ Betty Phillips, 'Lexical Diffusion as a Guide to Scribal Intent: A Comparison of ME <eo> and <e> Spellings in the *Peterborough Chronicle* and the *Ormulum*', in *Historical Linguistics 1994*, ed. Henning Andersen (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1995), 379–86.

the first to use <scæ> (*she*) as female singular personal pronoun (instead of Old English <heo>).³⁶ His use of <th> as an optional spelling for Old English <þ> and <d> comes close to an innovative system with structured heterogeneity and must be regarded as novel in the history of English.³⁷

Nevertheless, although it is easy to characterise the scribe as a linguistic innovator, it is impossible to ascertain, due to the lack of social data, whether he fulfils the criteria of the Milroys for typical innovators, such as occupying a marginal position in the network and having a lot of weak ties. Moreover, the introduction of <th> is not an example of 'speaker innovation' in the strictest sense, but rather 'scribal innovation', as it only occurs in written language features. But far more interesting is the question why <th> did not spread any further after 1155: why did it take more than 250 years for it to be adopted on a more general scale? This is one instance where an act of speaker innovation was unsuccessful and actualisation did not take place. Why was this incipient change resisted? It would be interesting to see this scribe at work within his monastic community. Was he an outsider? How did he get on with his superiors? Obviously, the production of such an important work must have been supervised in some form or other.

One important consideration is of course that the Final Continuator marks the end of an era: the social and linguistic circumstances after the Norman Conquest clearly favoured Latin and French as official written languages.³⁸ Moreover, although there must have been some people who *could have adopted* the new feature, it seems likely that the central members of the group, potential early adopters, were quickly replaced after the Norman Conquest by French or at least Francophile monks and authorities. Consequently, with most of the written communication in languages other than English, there was no medium through which the innovations could have spread. It was like a new phonological feature in a community of deaf. The situation might have been different for the introduction of <scæ>, since this was both a written and a spoken language feature, and English remained the most important spoken language in England even after the conquest.³⁹ This leads to one amendment to the principles of

³⁶ Anne Curzan, 'Third Person Pronouns in the Peterborough Chronicle', *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 3 (1996), 301–14.

³⁷ Alexander T. Bergs, "'Spoil for Choice?" <th> in Early Middle English', *Lana – Düsseldorf Working Papers on Linguistics*, eds. A. T. Bergs, M. S. Schmid & D. Stein (<http://ang3-11.phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de/~ang3/LANA/IANA.htm>, 1999), 1–14.

³⁸ See Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 197–223.

³⁹ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, p. 201.

social network analysis: potential innovators and early adopters are not the only prerequisites to successful actuations; a linguistic space is needed, too, a medium, through which innovations can spread.

4. CONCLUSION

Social network analysis as it has been developed for present-day purposes needs careful revision and testing when it is applied to the history of English before 1500, to say the least. To carry out a social network analysis with the same precision and scrutiny as Milroy's Belfast study, seems to me, at this stage, utopian. A social strength scale, prerequisite for any detailed micro-linguistic study, needs to be developed first,⁴⁰ but social data and sociological theories for that period are still lacking. Large-scale linguistic studies, however, seem extremely promising, as has been shown with the Pastons (fifteenth century), the Lollards (late fourteenth century) and the Peterborough Chronicle (twelfth century). Studying the language of other groups of speakers seems equally feasible: the Katherine Group, Langland,⁴¹ and Gower, to name only a few. In studying them, it might also be possible to develop the urgently needed network strength factors for that time. From my point of view, they are likely to involve education, sex, position within the family, involvement in local or supralocal politics and extensive travelling. In any case, there seem to be no theoretical reasons why social network analysis should not be conducted for the Middle English period as well. It seems as if Labov's claim still holds: the laws of language change are still the same. However, our tools for measuring them have to be adjusted, given the demands imposed by different periods in the history of English.

⁴⁰ Cf. Randy Bax's contribution to the present volume.

⁴¹ Cf. Ingrid Treen Boon van Ostade, 'The Origin and Development of the "Neg... Neither" Construction: A Case of Grammaticalisation', in *Negation in the History of English*, eds. Ingrid Treen Boon van Ostade, Gunnel Tottie and Wim van der Wurff (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), 207–31.