

The ‘Age of Prescriptivism’ and the reversion of /e/-lowering in 18C Cheshire Ileia Goode (University of Calgary, Canada)

The Eighteenth Century is often referred to as the ‘Age of Prescriptivism’. A turning point in technological advancement, the century saw unparalleled access to printed materials and unprecedented social mobility (Joseph 1987: 45-48). Coupled with the additional challenge of unifying the ever-growing British Empire, it is unsurprising that eighteenth-century England would seek stability and control through language. The increasing publication of grammars, usage guides, and related writings in the late 1700s highlights this fervor of interest in prescriptive ideology (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008).

Printing also offered a vehicle through which “proper” English could be taught while, perhaps inadvertently, capturing snapshots of the language, frozen in time. Through these glimpses into the past, English could be observed, considered, and, in turn, judged in comparison (Joseph 1987). Around the same time, /e/-lowering, the shift of /e/ > /a/ before /r/ (e.g. *stere* ‘star’, *ferme* ‘farm’, *fer* ‘far’), began to undergo reversion. Curiously, not all instances of lowered /e/ were reverted; today, for example, we use the lowered vowel /a/ in *star*, but the reverted vowel /e/ (now /ɛ/) in *servant*.

What linguistic and extra linguistic factors conditioned the lowering and subsequent reversion of /e/? Two notable descriptions of /e/-lowering, Wyld (1953) and Dobson (1968), suggest social class and a word’s language of origin were determining factors, but provide no quantitative analysis of the data to support that assertion. Subsequent literature on /e/-lowering cites Wyld and Dobson without question or additional analysis (see Lass 2000). As Denison (2007) notes, there are clear obstacles to studying eighteenth-century linguistic phenomena; spelling reform and standardisation efforts homogenised written English, reducing the textual phonological evidence available for sound change research (Beal and Sen 2014). Nevertheless, enough evidence of /e/-lowering persists in texts of the period to quantitatively test Wyld and Dobson’s conclusions (see the corpus described below).

A Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose is a collection of ~2000 letters written by 430 authors of varying social class. The diversity and regionality of the text offers promise for research, despite its formality (Eslpaß 2012). First, I compiled a database of 29,369 tokens containing <ar> and <er> sequences. From that, I extracted a list of unique lexical items to then determine the historical vowel and language of origin for each. With the completed database, I employed a series of logistic regressions, contingency tests, liner mixed models, and independence tests to explore potential factors influencing the occurrence of /e/, or its lowered counterpart. Results of these tests confirmed that social class played a vital role in the adoption of reverted spellings in writing and that language of origin was a statistically significant factor in the likelihood of a word undergoing reversion.

When comparing a word’s historical vowel to the observed vowel in a relevant token, 25.9% of Germanic tokens showed a vowel mismatch compared to only 3.8% of Romance tokens (see Fig. 1, 2). Using a G-test for independence, I confirmed that a token’s language of origin was statistically significant for determining its vowel. The role of social class in the story of /e/-lowering appears to be related to education and the use of historically high-prestige Latin and Romance words in printed media. This is likely because the upper classes had greater access to education and literature, and so were exposed to and taught the fossilised spellings of words present in texts available at the time. Germanic words, considered too “common” for use in learned contexts, were relegated to spoken use and so were free from the influence of spelling-based reversion (Miller 2012).

In summary, these tests constitute the first quantitative analysis of /e/-lowering, confirming that social class and language of origin are statistically significant factors determining the presence of /e/-lowering in eighteenth-century English letters. Finally, there is a lesson about methodology to be learned here: despite the challenges presented by the “Age of Prescriptivism”, it is still possible to uncover orthographic evidence of sound change in the period.

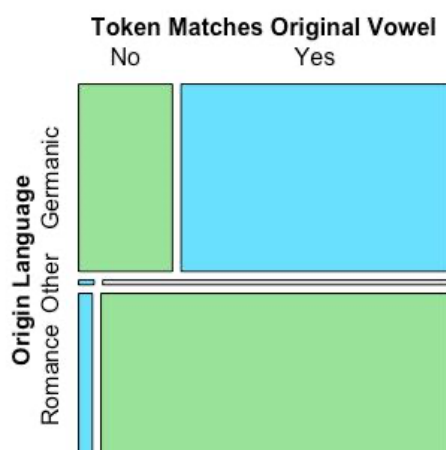


Figure 1. Mosaic of origin and vowel interaction

Word_Origin	Match		Total
	No	Yes	
Germanic	2612	7469	10081
	1565	8516	10081
	25.9 %	74.1 %	100 %
	88.5 %	46.5 %	53 %
Other	11	246	257
	40	217	257
	4.3 %	95.7 %	100 %
	0.4 %	1.5 %	1.4 %
Romance	330	8351	8681
	1348	7333	8681
	3.8 %	96.2 %	100 %
	11.2 %	52 %	45.6 %
Total	2953	16066	19019
	2953	16066	19019
	15.5 %	84.5 %	100 %
	100 %	100 %	100 %

observed values
 expected values
 % within Word_Origin
 % within Match

Figure 2. Contingency table of origin and vowel frequency

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