

The Social Diffusion of Linguistic Innovations in Fifteenth Century England: Chancery Spellings in Private Correspondence*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to apply the conclusions of recent sociolinguistic studies on the spread of innovations to the historical implementation of standard English. In particular, we believe that the attempts by James and Lesley Milroy at correlating standardisation, prestige norm focusing and the upward social aspirations of some speakers with the analytic tool of 'social networks' may yield fruitful conclusions as regards the social diffusion of the Chancery standard in the late fifteenth century. In view of the Uniformitarian Principle formulated by Labov, we believe that historical stages of language development were possibly subject to constraints similar to those affecting contemporary speech communities, to the extent that the linguistic behaviour of late fifteenth century speakers may have been determined by attitudes to prestige, by social and spatial mobility as well as by the everyday contacts and the personal circumstances of individuals. If this is so, the profile of those members of the community who adopted and transmitted the Chancery norm in the period may be reconstructed. With this purpose in mind we intend to trace a number of variables related to Chancery usage in the sections of late fifteenth century private correspondence included in the diachronic part of the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. The referential to social (sex, age, social status), geographical (dialect) parameters, as well as to type of interaction appended to each text in the Corpus will help us to draw a picture of the speakers who innovated and diffused the new norm at that time. (Keywords: linguistic innovation, social diffusion, standard English, historical sociolinguistics).

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RESUMEN

En este trabajo se intentan extender las conclusiones de algunos estudios de sociolingüística contemporánea sobre la difusión de las innovaciones lingüísticas al proceso de implementación histórica de la inriedad conocida como Inglés estándar. Conoceremos que la relación que han establecido Janzies y Lesley Milroy entre estandarización, difusión de las normas de prestigio y aspiraciones sociales de determinados individuos con la herramienta analítica de las 'redes sociales', puede permitir extraer conclusiones válidas sobre la difusión social del llamado 'Chancery standard' en la Inglaterra de finales del siglo quince. El principio de la Uniformidad, reformulado por Labov, nos permitiría entender que determinados procesos lingüísticos históricos podrían haber estado sujetos a los condicionamientos que afectan a las comunidades lingüísticas contemporáneas, de manera que el comportamiento de hablantes de inglés a finales del siglo quince podría haber estado condicionado por su actitud hacia el prestigio de determinadas normas, sus posibilidades de movilidad espacial y social, sus propias circunstancias personales (sexo, edad, estatus social) y sus contactos con otros miembros de sus 'redes sociales'. Si se acepta esta premisa, sería posible establecer el perfil de aquellos hablantes que adoptaron y transmitieron la variedad conocida como 'Chancery standard' en el siglo quince. Con este objetivo, se ha analizado la representación gráfica de distintas variables lingüísticas utilizadas en textos procedentes de la Cancillería y se ha contrastado con su representación en algunos documentos incluidos en la sección del Helsinki Corpus of English Texts dedicada a correspondencia privada del ese siglo. Las referencias a aspectos sociales (sexo, edad, clase social), geográficos (dialecto) y a el tipo de interacción entre autores y destinatarios de las cartas, que también se mencionan en el corpus, pueden ayudarnos a establecer el perfil de aquellos individuos que innovaban y difundían las nuevas normas lingüísticas en este periodo. (Palabras Clave: innovación lingüística, difusión social, Inglés estándar, sociolingüística histórica).

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we intend to apply the methods and conclusions of recent sociolinguistic studies on the spread of linguistic innovations to the historical implementation and social diffusion of a written standard norm in fifteenth century England. Our project falls, therefore, within the sphere of historical sociolinguistics in its broad sense of the branch of knowledge which seeks "...to investigate and provide an account of the forms and uses in which linguistic variation may manifest itself in a given community over time" (Romaine 1982: x). The extension of sociolinguistic methods to the question of standardisation is not new. During the late 60s, sociologists of language like Haugen (1966), Ray (1963), Williams (1968), Guxman (1968) or Stewart (1968) proposed some tenets which have now become common ground. Among them, the close relationship of the process to prescriptivism as parts of a common ideology or tradition of correctness, the necessity to separate the written and the oral levels and the idea that a standard can only be attained in the former, the association of the whole procedure with the language managers — the members of the community who are professionally involved with language — and its dissociation from linguistic features inherent to the varieties themselves and, finally, the view that the standardisation of one variety always implies — as two sides of the same coin — the dialectalisation of the others, have all become common principles in most

contemporary approaches to the subject. Eventually, this sociological stance has resulted in the general appraisal of the standard as a social ideal, a socially accepted abstraction, comparable to other social norms in being "... a complex of belief and behaviour towards language which evolves historically" (Downes 1984: 34). At this theoretical level, it is also worth mentioning the contribution of Dick Leith, who, in his *Social History of English*, has popularised the well-known methodological distinction — initially devised by Haugen (1966) — of four stages recurring in the historical implementation of standard varieties: 'selection', 'acceptance', 'functional elaboration' and 'codification' (1983: 40-43).

It is obvious from the title of this paper that our project concentrates on the stage of 'acceptance', which we widely and dynamically understand as the process of diffusion of the standard variety over the social and geographical spaces. In this sense, another key sociological concept is that of 'prestige norm focussing'. This was coined by Robert Le Page to describe the sociological observation that we create norms so as to resemble the behaviour of those members of the group or groups we wish to identify with. Linguistically speaking, an individual may change his or her verbal behaviour so as to adapt it to or distinguish it from that common to the group or groups he or she wishes to be identified with or differentiated from (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985: 181). The idea of the imitation of prestige varieties is not new in the diachronic study of languages: Otto Jespersen had already suggested it in *Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* (1925). However, it has been reassessed in the last decade in connection with the analysis of the role that daily interaction plays in the maintenance or shift of language varieties and, particularly, of the linguistic models 'enforced' by powerful or prestigious institutions. In this sense, we believe that the attempts by James and Lesley Milroy at correlating standardisation, prestige norm focusing and the upward social aspirations and mobility of some speakers with the analytic tool of 'social networks' may yield fruitful conclusions as regards the historical diffusion of the standard over the social space. Their contribution is also remarkable for the refinement of some key concepts which constitutes a methodological breakthrough in the study of standardisation. Particularly, they claim that the question should, on the whole, be confronted within the wider opposition between the linguistic forces of variation and uniformity. Thus they regard the standard as a codified set of norms which progressively repress variation and change from general social consciousness. As a result, they are careful to separate the inclination of linguistic varieties towards divergence from the tendency towards convergence derived from the conscious or unconscious agreement of certain members of the community, and draw a clear boundary between factors favouring the maintenance or shift of linguistic states (Milroy and Milroy 1985; Milroy 1992). As regards the stage of 'acceptance' or the process of diffusion, prestige, as the preceding sociologists of language had previewed, seems to be a triggering concept. However, James and Lesley Milroy carefully discriminate its exclusive association with the standard variety, provided, as Labov (1972) demonstrated, that it can be covertly attached by speakers to forms which are distant from the codified norms of the standard (Milroy 1989).

Finally, the employment of the sociological category of 'social network' for the appreciation of language use and, particularly, for the observation of language maintenance or shift should be understood, from our point of view, as an essential analytic tool for examining the historical diffusion of the standard over the social space. In this sense, James and Lesley Milroy have pointed to the existence of a covert and informal pressure for the individual to maintain the linguistic variety that he or she normally uses. This is exerted by the members of his or her own social network — those related to him or her by kin and friendship. This

pressure is stronger when the ties between them are dense — virtually everybody knows everybody else in the group — and the network is close-knit: a situation which prevails at the highest and lowest social layers of the speech community. But there are also some social and geographically mobile speakers falling in between. These individuals, who, by virtue of their social and spatial mobility, may establish loose-knit networks, are more exposed to linguistic pressures originating outside the group. Particularly when they belong to upward mobile sections of the population they are more liable to be influenced by prestige norms, either in a covert way, when these speech habits are characteristic of the close-knit networks located at the highest strata, or overtly, when the prestige variety is enforced by the institutions through public channels (Milroy 1987: 209). It seems, therefore, that the social and geographical mobility of potential adopters is a fundamental factor in the process of diffusion of linguistic innovations associated to a prestigious norm. It facilitates interaction and mixture, both horizontally — from one geographical area to another — and vertically — from one social class to another. Similarly, social networks and the speaker's degree of adherence to them, in addition to each individual's position as core or peripheral member of the network, should also affect considerably the possibility of adopting or rejecting a given innovation. An individual belonging to a weak and loose-knit social network would have a higher number of contacts with speakers of other varieties and, as a result, his or her own variety would be more innovative; on the contrary, an individual with strong and close-knit social networks would have a lower number of contact with speakers of other varieties and his or her own variety would be more conservative.

The infeasibility of wholly describing the social networks of speakers who died five centuries ago is obvious. Similarly, some of the assumptions applied by James and Lesley Milroy to contemporary linguistic situations — like the importance of public channels for the diffusion of innovations — can hardly be extended to the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, this should not discourage us from assessing the value of their theory for delineating the characteristics of the individuals who adopted and transmitted linguistic norms in late medieval England, thus contributing to the social diffusion of the Chancery standard — the written variety used in official governmental documents. In this sense, the Uniformitarian Principle formulated by Labov (1972: 161; 1994: 21-23) — the idea that the constraints affecting contemporary speech communities may be extrapolated from the present to historical stages of language development — allows us to believe that the linguistic behaviour of late fifteenth century speakers may have been determined, to some extent, by attitudes to prestige, by social and spatial mobility as well as by the everyday contacts and the personal circumstances of individuals. Several studies over the last decade have attempted to trace the adoption of the Chancery norm in the official records of other corporations (Hughes 1980; Christianson 1989) as well as its extension beyond the confines of the administrative system and its use by scribes unconnected with the civil service (Fischer 1977; Doyle & Parkes 1978; Gómez Soliño 1986; Burnley 1989), but there are few reviews of its adoption by upwardly mobile individuals who aimed to imitate the products of the capital and avoid the censure of provincialism in their written practices. We believe that by correlating the findings of James and Lesley Milroy with the economic growth of London in the late Middle Ages, a picture of the speakers who innovated and adopted the written norm may be drawn.

The economic transformation of the Southeast Midlands and, particularly, the city of London, as important centres for the exportation of corn and wool in the late Middle Ages, not only explains the increase of demographic rates, but also the growth of immigration from all

over the country. The expected social effect of this economic upsurge is the possibility of social mobility within this highly stratified and densely populated area. The existence of realistic chances of social promotion may have led many members of the middle classes to aspire to the status of the upper ranks, thus creating an atmosphere in which the imitation of social norms was a common phenomenon (Shaklee 1980; Briggs 1983: 108-113; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 1989: 106). This practice may be extended to the adoption of one of the written varieties which enjoyed a high prestige — the one used at the Chancery — and its consequent promotion to one of the standard norms that upwardly mobile sections of the population strove to copy. Similarly, migration, economic diversification, urbanisation and better communications all concurred in the development of loose-knit social networks and in the increase of weak ties between its members. Connecting this new sociological structure with upwardly mobile social classes and with geographical mobility may shed light on who adopted the written norm and, consequently, on how it was socially diffused. In this sense, Davis (1983) has observed that the individuals whose writing seemed nearest to the Chancery standard were not those of the upper classes (nobility), but rather courtiers and soldiers who seemed to have thought it worthwhile to alter their linguistic habits in the direction of the prevailing prestigious norm.

II. THE ADOPTION OF 'CHANCERY' SPELLINGS IN FIFTEENTH CENTURY PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE

11.1. Objectives

Despite the obvious difficulties mentioned above, the preservation of some collections of late fifteenth century private correspondence — like the Paston letters, the Cely letters and the Stonor letters — involving writers of different sex, age, social extraction, personal circumstances and geographical location, offers a very useful corpus to try and establish the general profile of the individuals who adopted the Chancery norm in the period. The existence of such valuable collections of texts have encouraged us to get involved in a large project which aims to identify the social network of the correspondents — as far as the data in the letters allow us to do — and to correlate its structure both with certain social factors (like social status, sex and age) and with the degree of adoption of the Chancery norm as noted in a number of selected variables. We also believe that the diverse geographical provenance of the letters and the association of each group of correspondents with a given ME dialect area — Norfolk and the East Midland dialect in the case of the Pastons, Oxfordshire and the South-Western variety in the case of the Stonors and London in the case of the Celys — may also allow us to apply geolinguistic methods and to find out about the geographical diffusion of the Chancery standard, provided that factors like population density and geographical distance can be found out.

In this paper we just offer a brief sample of this work-in-progress. It is based on the eleven letters written by members of the Paston family which are included in the diachronic part of the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. The letters were sent and received between 1425 and 1372, a period of 47 years which was crucial in the implementation and diffusion of the Chancery norm. This written variety, according to Richardson (1980), started to replace French and Latin at the governmental offices in 1417, when King Henry V (1413-1422)

launched his second invasion of France. The reason for this shift seems to have been the state necessity of winning the economic support of the well-off middle classes, for whom French and Latin were already an inconvenience. A study of Henry V's personal letters tends to confirm his role in the development of this standard variety, since, according to Richardson, his idiolect is closer to the Chancery norms than any other idiolect found in the official correspondence of Henry's reign (1980: 737). However, the ultimate language of the secretariat was only partly based on the king's own usage: rather it constituted a blend of different forms which soon gained the status of written norm. J.H. Fischer (1977: 870-899; 1979: 136-144; 1996: 36-64) has studied the influence of Chancery practices on other varieties of English during the fifteenth century, and has demonstrated that by 1430 the Chancery had developed a coherently standardised written dialect, which resembles modern standard English, and that the Chancery clerks functioned as filters eliminating the orthographic variations of the petitions passed on to them. The expansion of this early regularised variety was assisted by a number of circumstances. In addition to the prestige and authority of the documents issued by the Chancery, the necessity of precise forms by lawyers and other government officials, and the increased professionalism of the clerks, the adoption of the Chancery norm may have been favoured by at least another major factor: the training programme for young clerks of the Chancery and law students not affiliated with it. This training system contributed to transmit the incipient standard not only to beginning clerks, but also throughout the legal profession, thus establishing it as the language of law in England (Richardson 1980: 743-744). That different members of the Paston family progressively adopted this written norm is therefore expected, in view of the fact that they quickly rose in the social scale and that some of its male members became lawyers. What we intend to trace is the individual rate of adoption of this written variety and correlate it with the social factors and the personal circumstances of each speaker in order to corroborate the hypothesis that the adoption and diffusion of a prestigious variety was historically associated with the social and geographical mobility of speakers, which in turn may contribute to create weak ties within loose-knit social networks that are, obviously, reflexes of these two factors (i.e. social and geographical mobility).

11.2. The Pastons (from 1425 to 1472)

The Paston Letters is the name given to a large collection of texts written in the fifteenth century and early years of the sixteenth by different generations of this Norfolk family. The historical and philological interest of these documents is outstanding, not only because they offer data on the political and domestic history of fifteenth century England, but also because — as was remarked above — they were composed at a crucial period in the development of the English language. Written evidence on the Paston family mentions Clement Paston as founder of the dynasty. Although no letters written by him have been preserved, a document drawn up in the 1450s describes him as "... a good plain husbandman [who] lived on the land that he had in Paston, on which he kept a plough at all times of the year". The same document states that, despite the social position of freeman and owner of "five or six score acres of land at the more" he managed to send his son William to school, sometimes "borrow[ing] the money to find his school fees" (Barber 1993: 11-12). This account provides evidence that the initial social position of this Norfolk family was not originally as high as it was to be later in the century. The family fortunes improved with William Paston I (1378-1444). He was the only

son of Clement. who. after school. was trained as a lawyer and gained a good local reputation: he acted as counsel for the city of Norwich from 1412 and in 1415 he became steward to the duke of Norfolk. beginning a successful career at the royal courts. where he. eventually. became Justice of the Common Bench in 1429. In 1420 he had married Agnes Berry. the daughter of a Hertfordshire knight. who inherited her father's lands in 1433. William himself had also managed to increase the original family property by buying the manor of Oxnead. Although evidence of his personal contacts is scant. social mobility is obvious and. through his different positions and jobs. some degree of geographical mobility between. at least. London and his manors near Norfolk should also be assumed. Three letters by William Paston are included in the *Helsinki Corpus*. They are all official letters dealing with some of the lawsuits with which. as a lawyer. he was concerned. Consequently. they are all written in a formal style between 1425 and 1430. when he was in his late 40s and early 50s. William Paston and Agnes Berry had four sons and one daughter — John I (1421-1466). Edmund I (1425-1499). Elizabeth (1429?-1488). William II (1436-1496) and Clement II (1442-1479) — of whom the firstborn followed his father into the law. In the corpus. however. there are no letters by this ambitious and highly mobile character. who was almost knighted in 1455 and became MP for Norfolk in 1460. The corpus includes three letters which William's youngest son. Clement II. wrote to his brother John between 1461 and 1464. when he was in his early 20s. They deal with everyday affairs and problems over the family estates and provide us with familiar texts sent to an equal by a young man who is in London completing his education.

Even though there are no letters in the *Helsinki Corpus* by John I. possibly because he spent most of his life in London and was therefore a recipient rather than a sender of these documents. it offers a brief selection of three letters sent by Margaret Paston to her husband (John I) between 1448 and 1449. These letters also deal with family matters and lawsuits and provide us with important linguistic documents which were possibly written by a female person who had spent most of her life in the manors which the family owned near Norfolk. It is quite likely. however. that Margaret did not write the letters herself. but the family clerk and chaplain — James Glowys — did so for her. We believe that this fact would only affect the variable sex but not the absence of geographical and social mobility of the informer. in view of the fact that the latter did also spend most of his life in the county of Norwich. John and Margaret's offspring includes four sons and two daughters — John II (1442-1479). John III (1444-1504). Edmund II (d. 1504). Margery (d. 1479). Anne. Walter (d. 1479) and William III (b. 1459?). Only two letters from the first-born are included in the Corpus. They are informal letters sent to his brother John III in 1471 and 1472. when he was in his 30s. John II seems to have been a 'gentleman of leisure'. interested in books. tournaments and love affairs: sometimes he failed to defend the family interests adequately and is often accused in his mother's letters of overspending. His political career makes of him a highly social and geographically mobile character. In 1461 he had joined King Edward IV's court and was knighted two years later. He was also MP for Norfolk between 1467 and 1468 and accompanied princess Margaret to Bruges on the occasion of her marriage. In the 70s he became a soldier and participated in different battles of the War of Roses. both in Britain and the Continent — particularly at Calais.

The characteristics of each of the four informants are reflected in Table 1. Regarding social status. it is obvious that the members of this family evolved from the middle-high position of the professional lawyer William Paston I. to the higher one attained by John Paston II who became a member of the court nobility when he was knighted in the 1460s. This could

be taken as a clue to their social upper mobility. As far as sex is concerned, there are no differences between the informants, unless we understand that Margaret Paston wrote the letters herself, which is uncertain. So, the basic differences between them are connected with age, social network and context of situation or style. As regards the first factor (age), three age groups are represented in the study: the oldest informant, William Paston I, wrote the letters when he was in his late 40s and early 50s; the youngest one, Clement Paston II, was in his 20s when he issued these documents, and, finally, there is the middle-aged John Paston II who was around 30 when he wrote the letters in the corpus. As far as context of situation and style are concerned, we have adopted the labels 'formal' or 'informal' which in the *Helsinki Corpus* qualify each of the texts. They are established on the basis of the relationship between addresser and addressee (familiar) and of the subject-matter. Thus, the five letters exchanged between brothers and the three letters sent by a wife to her husband, all of them dealing with domestic family matters and lawsuits, are classified as informal and may be close to the everyday written language of the fifteenth century. However, the three official letters sent by William Paston I are samples of formal style. Finally, regarding social networks, for the purposes of this tentative paper, we have considered that a high rate of geographical mobility could be correlated with the establishment of weak and loose-knit social networks, while, on the contrary, a low rate of mobility should accompany the establishment of strong and close-knit networks.

Table 1

BACKGROUND OF INFORMANTS							
Informant	Sex	Date of letters	Age	Geographical location	Social position	Social network	Context and style
William Paston I	Male	1425-30	40s-50s	Norwich London	Middle-High professional	Weak and loose-knit	Formal
Margaret Mautby/ James Glowys	Female/ Male	1448-49	?	Norwich	Middle-High	Strong and close-knit	Informal
Clement Paston II	Male	136164	20s	Norwich London	Middle-High	Weak and loose-knit (?)	Informal
John Paston II	Male	1471-72	30s	Norwich London Bruges Calais	High courtier soldier	Weak and loose-knit	Informal

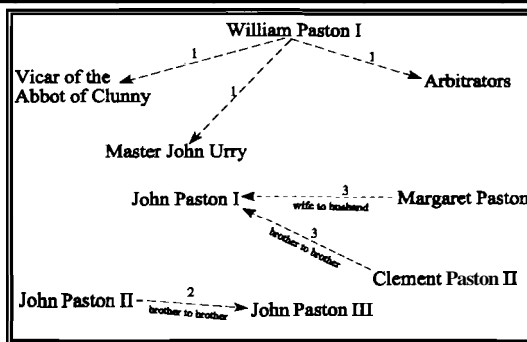


Figure 1: Correspondence analysed from the Paston Family

11.3. Linguistic variables

For the purposes of this pilot study we have only considered three orthographical variables. This is for two basic reasons. Firstly, because of the obvious impossibility of dealing with medieval spoken language or conversation, and secondly because the final objective of this work is tracing the adoption of a written norm — the Chancery standard. In any case, we believe that the analysis of graphemic variables drawn from epistolary documents instead of the usual phonological ones included in recorded conversations can be a highly informative experience. Especially if we understand that the letters under scrutiny are part of communicative interaction and that their adherence to the standard norm possibly varied, at a time when writing was not wholly standardised, in correlation with such factors as sex, age, social status, geographical mobility, social network and context of usage. The different variants that appear in the letters are contrasted with regular spelling practices systematically used in the documents issued by the Chancery offices, namely:

Variable (sh) refers to the spelling <sh> as used in the words SHOULD, SHALL, WORSHIP and SHE in Chancery documents. It was possibly pronounced in ME as the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/. In the texts it alternates with archaic spelling forms like <sch>, <ssh>, <ch> and even <x> in the case of the auxiliaries *shall* and *should*.

Variable (wh) refers to the spelling <wh> of the word WHICH as used in Chancery documents. It was possibly pronounced as the labio-velar semivowel /w/ both in the East Midland area, where Norfolk is, and in the city of London where the Chancery standard was in use. However its spelling is not wholly regular throughout the documents. Alternative spellings include the dialectal forms <qw> and <qu>, which may reflect the influence of northern usage.

Variable (u) refers to the ME grapheme <u> as used in the ME words SUCH and MUCH in the Chancery texts. This grapheme, which was possibly pronounced as the short, high, back vowel *iu*, is historically related to an OE grapheme <y>, possibly corresponding in pronunciation to the rounded Cardinal Vowel 1, as in French *du*. Alternative spellings for this grapheme include the regional forms <e>, <o> and <y> and the archaic ones <uy>, <wy> and <ui>.

In spite of the varied range of alternative forms, which extend from mere archaic spellings to regional ones, we have just considered the different variants represented in the texts as belonging either to the incipient standard variety, and therefore agreeing with Chancery practices, or to the non-standard, i.e. disagreeing with the Chancery norm.

11.4. Methodology and Procedure

The different graphemic variants (standard forms *versus* non-standard forms) used for the three variables (sh, wh, u) in the eleven letters have been detected and quantified. In order to test whether the usage of the standard and/or non-standard forms was produced randomly we applied the *chi-square* test (χ^2). This is a non-parametric statistical procedure normally used to test the independence or interdependence (non-significance/significance) of the distribution of two namable characteristics within a population (R. Fasold 1984: 95). Considering as null hypothesis (H₀) that 'the use of standard/non-standard forms is at random', the probability index for each use was 50%. In some quantifications, given that the dependent variables employed are qualitative, a numerical value has been assigned to each one in order to carry out

an adequate statistical treatment (1 for standard forms, and 2 for non-standard forms). Although in most cases the confidence interval reached 99.9% and two degrees of freedom, 95% and one degree of freedom with two dependent variables involved was decided to be used in order to make the statistical significance procedure more homogeneous; this meant that the theoretical χ^2 had to be smaller than or equal to 3.84 in order to reject the null hypothesis ($p < 0.05$). In any case, the chi-square value obtained in some cases can be considered as suspect due to the fact that some scores are lower than 5.

11.5. Results

The detection and quantification of the different graphemic variants (standard forms *versus* non-standard forms) used in the eleven letters analysed offered the results displayed in Appendix 1.

Contemporary studies have shown certain patterns of linguistic behaviour which are considerably regular at least in the Western world. Regarding **social status**, the use of linguistic variants is related to social class: if a linguistic variable reveals class stratification, certain variants are used more frequently by the highest-status class, less frequently by the intermediate classes, still much less frequently by the lowest-status class, and vice versa, with the frequency matching their relative status. Furthermore, in these studies variability has been demonstrated to be not only correlated with social classes, but also that it is highly affected by the **situational context**. Although different social groups have different levels of usage of a given variable, their evaluation of the different variants is exactly the same: speakers of all classes change their linguistic habits in exactly the same direction, increasing the percentage of high-status forms in their speech, as stylistic context becomes more and more formal, and vice versa, approaching the non-standard in informal style. The **sex** of the speaker is another social parameter with which linguistic differences have been demonstrated to correlate very closely and significantly. As Chambers and Trudgill point out, «other things being equal, women tend on average to use more higher status variants than men do» (1980: 72). **Age** differentiation is also possible in language if we correlate linguistic variables with different age groups in addition to social class and style. The results of different sociolinguistic studies have shown an abscissa with a curvilinear pattern where youngest and oldest speakers are perceived to be users of more non-prestigious variants than middle-aged speakers. Individuals' social networks, as seen above, have also been demonstrated to have a considerable impact on their linguistic behaviour: people are influenced linguistically by members of the social networks to which they belong, and even within the same social group there may be linguistic differences very closely related to the core/peripheral nature of its members: it is the 'weak' rather than the 'strong' social ties in the social network that facilitate the adoption of prestigious forms because they i) require a smaller effort, ii) affect a wider range of individuals, iii) tend to escape from vernacular speech norms, and iv) are most exposed to external pressures for change, such as the strength of contact with speakers from other different regional varieties. Additionally, regular mobility leads inevitably to the weakening of ties to local communities, with those speakers whose social contacts are class-heterogeneous being more likely to act as potential innovators. Other social variables, such as ethnicity, religion, individual's social ambition, etc. have also correlated significantly with linguistic variables.

The reduced number of informants and data of this pilot study (only the eleven Paston letters included in the *Helsinki* Corpus) does not allow us to establish definite comparisons

between contemporary and medieval patterns of linguistic behaviour. Nevertheless, some specific phenomena can be inferred which, from our point of view, are very interesting as regards the diffusion of the Chancery norm and confirm the objectives of the larger project in which we are involved. The chi-square statistical tests show a distribution of the variants which is significant at $p < 0.05$, though in most cases at $p < 0.001$.

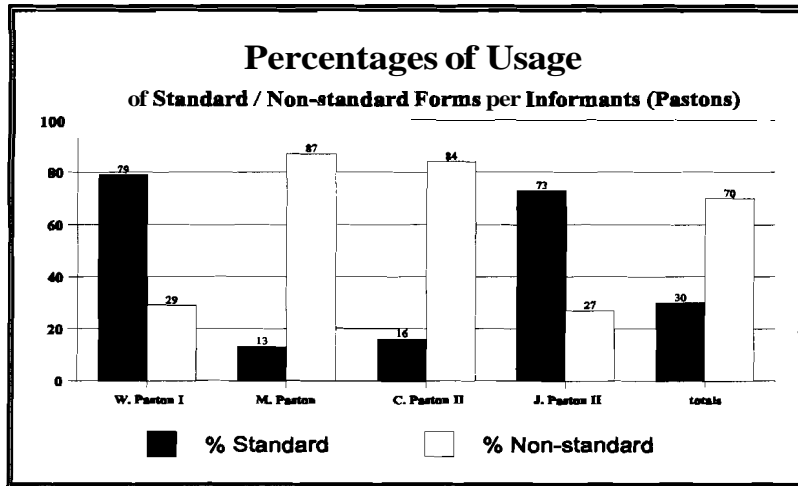


Figure 2

As regards the correlation of standardisation and social class, we are not able to offer any definite conclusion, since all the informants belong to the same family and have a uniform social status (minor gentry). Nevertheless, the fact that they are not part of the aristocratic and courtly nobility — the very upper layers of fifteenth century English society — but were originally professionals and owners of rural estates should be considered as a clue on their mobility. In a sense, the family prospered between the 1420s and the 1470s, when one member of the family was knighted and attended the royal court. The relationship between sex and degree of standardisation can only apparently be measured. In fact, a comparison between the forms used by male and female informants in Appendix 1 would clearly tell us that the contemporary pattern of linguistic behaviour connected to gender differences is completely different from the medieval one: male informants obtain much higher scores of standard forms than the female informant, who merely reaches a 13%. Even though we can understand that this was the expected situation in medieval society, when women's educational and social progress was very often constrained, the linguistic data available from Marporet Paston is by no means reliable, because, as mentioned in 11.2, it was probably a male person (James Glowys) who wrote the letters for her. This means that the variable sex could be 'distorted'.

By contrast, the current impact of the characteristics of social networks on linguistic behaviour seems to be similar to the situation in medieval times. Individuals who, in view of their mobility, possibly established weak and loose-knit networks would have a higher number of contacts with speakers of other varieties and, as a result, their linguistic practices would be more innovative. Contrarily, those who by virtue of the absence of mobility may be inferred to have established strong and close-knit networks, would have a lower number of contacts

with speakers of other varieties and, as a result, their linguistic behaviour would be more conservative. The correlation between the use of standard variants, the mobility and the possible social networks of our informants (Appendix 1 and Figure 2) is, in this sense, significant.

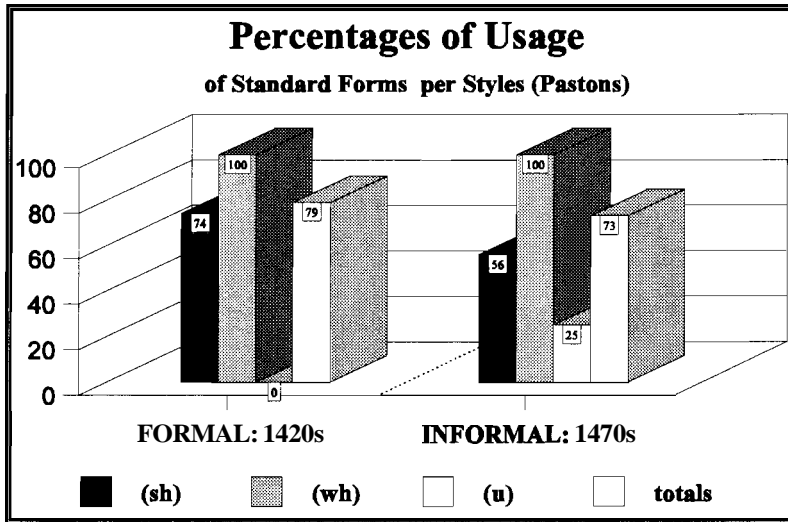


Figure 3

Margaret Paston, a female speaker apparently without mobility, or James Glowys, if we believe that this local chaplain wrote her letters, are both characterised by the absence of mobility, which we understand as a clue on the establishment of strong ties and close-knit networks. As expected, she or he shows the lower percentages of standard forms (13%). However, John Paston II, a highly socially and geographically mobile informant who may have established a considerable number of weak ties and loose-knit networks shows higher scores (73%).¹ The exception to this pattern is Clement Paston II, who was studying in London at the time he wrote the letters. In view of his mobility, it is expected that he should have established less strong ties and less close-knit networks than her mother, but his usage of standard variants (16%) is similar to hers (13%). We believe that, in this case, the age factor could be taken into account and that a pattern of linguistic behaviour correlated with it, similar to the one currently detected in Western societies, can be found in this corpus. When we contrast the scores of the youngest informant, Clement Paston, with those of the middle-aged one, John Paston II, we notice that the older shows a higher percentage of standard forms (73%) than the younger (16%). This may be related to the present-day tendency for young speakers to include more non-prestigious variants in their linguistic repertoire.

Regarding style — as shown by the type of relationship between addresser and addressee and by the subject matter of the different letters —, we have noticed a significant correlation of this factor of variability with age and time. If we believe that the implementation of the standard variety progresses from formal to informal styles over time — the greater the frequency of standard forms in informal/familiar styles, the greater the degree of standardisation — (see Romaine 1982 and 1988), the comparison of the use of standard variants

in the three formal texts written by William Paston I between 1425 and 1430 (Appendix 1 and Figure 3) and those used in the informal letters issued by his grandson John Paston II in the 1470s (Appendix 1 and Figure 3) shows a noticeable step in the diffusion of the Chancery: the formal style in the 1420s (79%) was similar to the familiar tone used about 50 years later (73%) in the 1470s. This means that in this period of time the extension of the Chancery standard advanced in a stable direction.

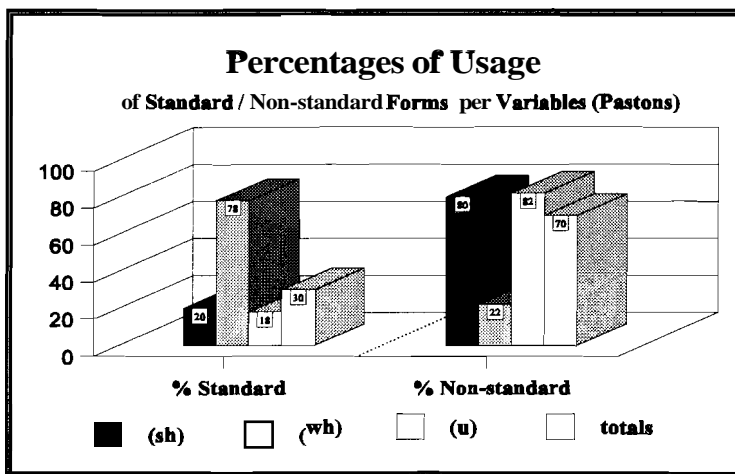


Figure 4

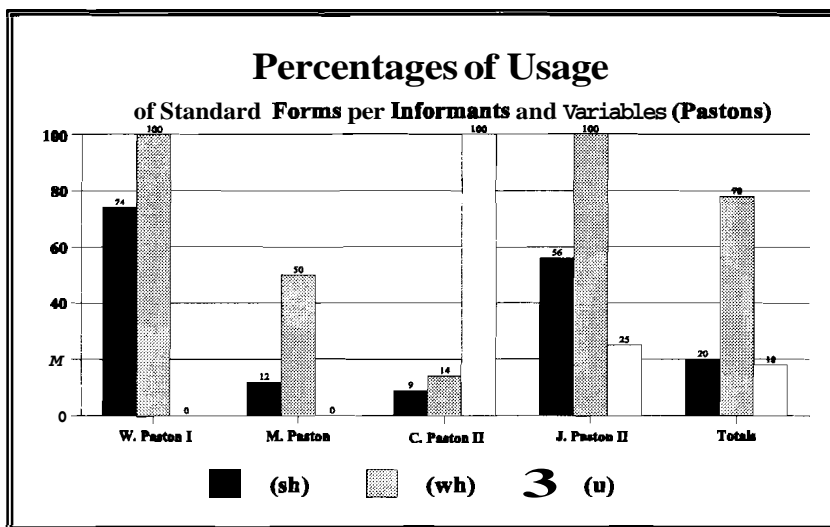


Figure 5

Regarding each variable, we also understand that their greater appearance in informal texts implies a greater degree of standardisation. In this sense, progress in the implementation

of each variable is higher in John Paston II's letters than in those of any other informant using the informal style. This implies a stable increase in the use of the standard variants from the first to the last dates available (see Appendix 1 and Figures 4 and 5). The Chancery variant <wh> for the variable (wh) seems to be completely standardised in the 1470s, having reached 100% in the informal style in the 1470s. The process of diffusion of the Chancery forms for both (sh) and (u), as opposed to the non-standard variants, seems, however, to be still in progress (Figure 6), going through some of the stages in the transition from the categorical use of the non-standard variant to its categorical replacement by the standard one.

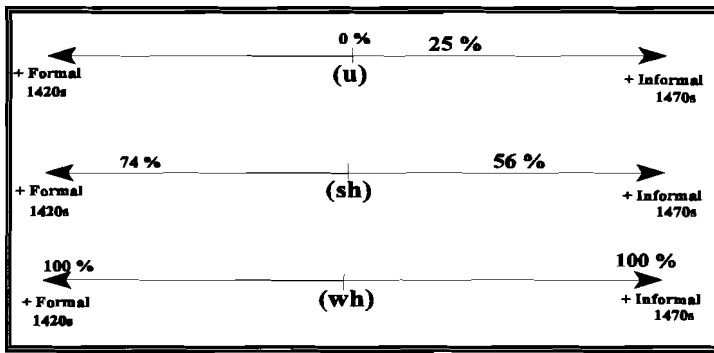


Figure 6: Process of diffusion of the Chancery standard forms in the Pastois

Variable (sh) in particular seems to be in a stage of great variability, having very close frequencies of usage for both the standard (56%) and the non-standard (44%) variants in the informal texts of the 1470s. This means that the new form, the Chancery form <sh>, is still in transition from the categorical use of the non-standard variant to the categorical use of the standard one. However, the standard form <u> for variable (u) seems to be still in the initial stages of change, being wholly implemented in only 25% of cases in informal texts of the same decade.

To sum up, the statistical analysis of the data shows that there is a significant correlation between, on the one hand, the use of spelling forms connected to the Chancery offices, and, on the other, such factors as increasing age, geographical mobility and the consequent establishment of weak ties within loose-knit networks. These should be understood as the basic characteristics of the individuals who adopted the Chancery norm in the course of the fifteenth century. It is highly possible, although the data in our corpus could be distorted, that the sex of this typical adopter was male, in view of the fact that women's educational and social advancement were often constrained in the late medieval period. Finally, we have also noticed a significant correlation between standardisation, style and time in the sense that the progressive implementation of standard forms in the course of time tends to proceed from formal texts to informal ones. This has also allowed us to point to the particular rate of standardisation that each of the selected variables had attained in the particular idiolect of these correspondents by the time the last letters were written (in the 1470s).

III. FOLLOW-UP STUDY

As we have already stated, this is just a tentative study and should be placed within the context of a larger project. We intend to enlarge the corpus by analysing other collections of fifteenth century private correspondence, namely the Stonor letters and the Cely letters, and to work with a greater number of texts, not merely those included in the *Helsinki Corpus* (see Appendix 7 for an example). This would allow us to confirm the provisional conclusions of this pilot study and, since each of the families of correspondents is connected to a different ME regional area, to undertake an interdialectal analysis which may allow us to extend our research to the process of geographical diffusion of the Chancery norm. Furthermore, working with a larger number of texts may allow us to draw more exact pictures of the informants and, particularly, of their personal relationships. In turn, this may help us to draw more neatly the social networks of the speakers involved and to confirm the profile of the adopters as well as to establish that of the diffusers.

As a brief sample of what a large-scale interdialectal study may offer, we have attempted a further comparison of the results obtained in the analysis of the same three variables in the Paston letters with other fifteenth century private documents contained in the *Helsinki Corpus*. They are fifteen letters belonging to five informants of the same middle-high social status as the Pastons and written in the same familiar style. The new correspondents are Elizabeth Stonor, Thonias Mull and Thonias Betson from the Stonor family of Oxfordshire, and George Cely and Richard Cely, from the Cely family of London. The comparison between the scores of the three families — as reflected in Figure 7 and Table 2 — evinces that it is the Pastons from Norfolk who, on average, exhibit a lower percentage of usage of Chancery forms: 30% as opposed to the 63% of the Celys and the 89% of the Stonors.

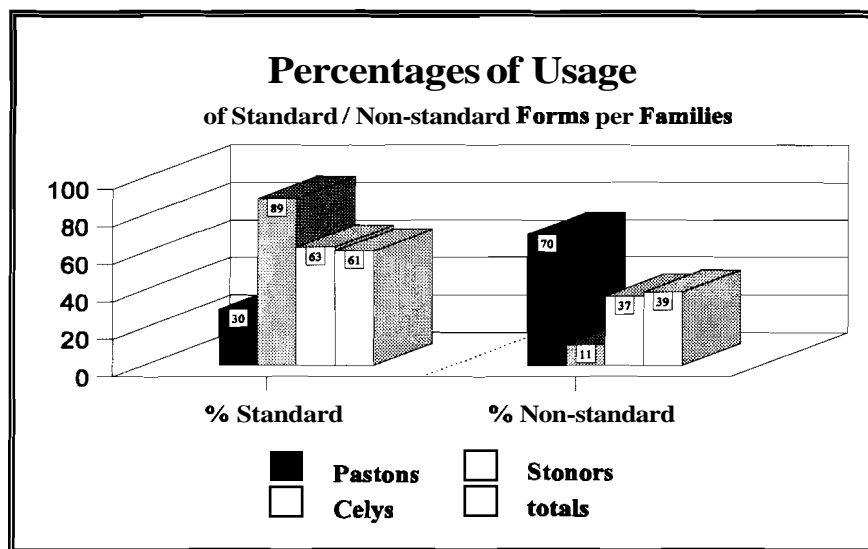


Figure 7

Table 2

USAGE OF STANDARD/NON-STANDARD VARIANTS: VARIABLE (sh)									
Variable	Variants	Pastons		Stonori		Celys		total	
	Standard (Chancery) Variant	20%	37	93%	118	48%	32	48%	187
	Non-Standard Variant	80%	146	7%	23	52%	33	52%	203
total		100%	183	100%	141	100%	66	100%	390
Statistics	$\chi^2 (H_0 = \leq 3.84; p < 0.05) = 128.55$								
VARIABLE (wh)									
Variable	Variants	Pastons		Stonors		Celys		total	
(wh)	Standard (Chancery) Variant	78%	35	100%	77	100%	41	94%	153
	Non-Standard Variant	22%	10	0%	0	0%	0	6%	10
total		100%	45	100%	77	100%	41	100%	163
Statistics	$\chi^2 (H_0 = \leq 3.84; p < 0.05) = 27.93$								
VARIABLE (u)									
Variable	Variants	Pastons		Stonors		Celys		total	
(u)	Standard (Chancery) Variant	18%	4	83%	10	0%	0	33%	14
	Non-Standard Variant	82%	18	17%	2	100%	8	67%	28
total		100%	22	100%	12	100%	8	100%	42
Statistics	$\chi^2 (H_0 = \leq 3.84; p < 0.05) = 19.77$								
TOTALS									
Variants		Pastons		Stonors		Celys		total	
Standard (Chancery) Variant		30%	76	89%	205	63%	73	59%	354
Non-Standard Variant		70%	174	11%	25	37%	42	41%	241
Total		100%	250	100%	230	100%	115	100%	595
Statistics		$\chi^2 (H_0 = \leq 3.84; p < 0.05) = 172.40$							

The chi-square statistical test shows that the use of standard and non-standard forms is not precisely random: dealing with totals, the chi square values calculated for each family are significant at $p < 0.05$, being the Pastons more consistently non-standard, the Stonors, more consistently standard, and the Celys, moderately standard, or even fluctuating between standard and non-standard. This is possibly connected with the linguistic similarity of their respective local varieties — the South-Western in the case of the Stonors, and the South-Eastern in the case of the Celys — to the riew Chancery norm. In fact, as Mackenzie (1928) and Ekwall (1956) demonstrated decades ago, both varieties had a conclusive linguistic influence on the configuration of the London dialect in the fourteenth century, while East Midland features, the local variety of the Pastons in Norfolk, started to pour into the London dialect later in the ME period. Indeed, that the Stonor documents show a greater degree of standardisation could be correlated with the historical fact that the Charicery offices were established in Westminster which, originally, was not part of the City, but lay a short distance to the west of the walls, within the county of Middlesex where the South-Western dialect was used. Finally, factors like population density of the areas involved and geographical distance from the origin of the innovation may have influenced this situation, although the absence of data does not allow us to confirm this hypothesis so far.

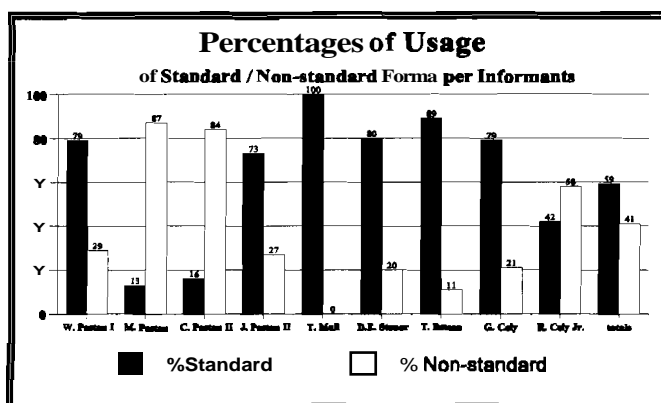


Figure 8

Regarding informants (Figure 8), the fact that one character from the Stonor family — Thomas Mull — shows a score of 100% of standardisation (as far as these three variables are concerned) has made us ponder the significance that the analysis of the internal degree of variability within each informant’s repertoire would have for our project. With this purpose, the statistical analysis based on the standard deviation and mean of all the informants’ scores has been carried out. The results — which are displayed in Figure 9 — show that variability is an inverse function of standardisation/non-standardisation: variability in informants decreases as their rate of standardisation increases. and, as a result, the variety that they use is more homogeneously standard. At the other end, when the degree of non-standardisation decreases, variability in informants also diminishes and, therefore, the non-standard variety that they use is more homogeneously non-standard. Thomas Mull and Margaret Paston are the extreme points of this standard-non-standard continuum, with the former being homogeneously standard and the latter homogeneously non-standard.

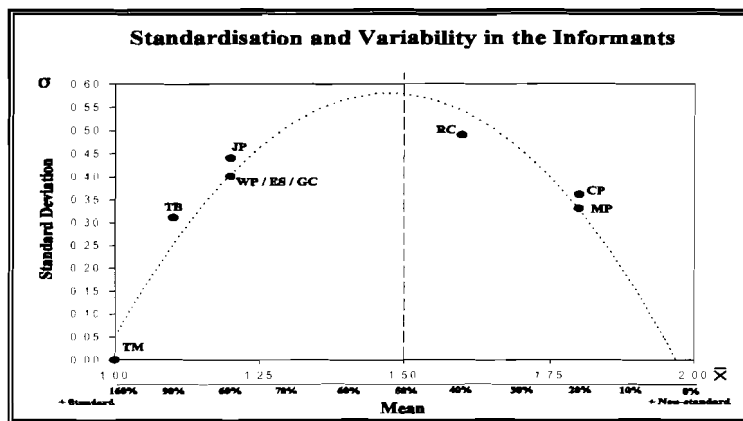


Figure 9: Standard Deviation Variation in relation to Standardisation: the higher the informant’s standardisation, the lower the spectrum of variability of his/her mean standard. Graph obtained with the Statistical Package *Sigma-Plot for Windows* (ver. 3.06).

Figure 10 is a different display of the same phenomenon where the interaction between the informants' standardisation mean and the subtraction and addition of their standard deviation, suggest that the closer to the extreme points (standard and non-standard ends) the standardisation mean is, the shorter the interval $(\bar{x} + \sigma) - (\bar{x}) - (\bar{x} - \sigma)$ is, and thus the smaller the spectrum of variability: contrarily, the closer to the middle point (centre) the standardisation mean is, the wider the spectrum of variability. In this way, Thomas Mull seems to be the purest standard speaker in this group, with no interval at all ranging from standard to non-standard use, i.e. with no variability present in his language variety. The degree of standardisation attained by the rest of informants is lower than T. Mull's and ranges depending on how near the ends they are. William Paston, John Paston, Thomas Betson and George Cely show a highly standardised usage: they are scarcely variable in their use of standard and non-standard forms, the first ones normally predominating. On the contrary, Margaret Paston and Clement Paston II tend towards pure non-standard usage and show a reduced range of variability in their use of standard and non-standard forms, the second ones normally predominating. Richard Cely has the widest spectrum of variability, appearing as the most variable as far as his use of standard and non-standard forms are concerned. More data, however, are necessary to corroborate the existence of this function so that the larger the distance from the extreme points, the wider the range of the interval/spectrum.

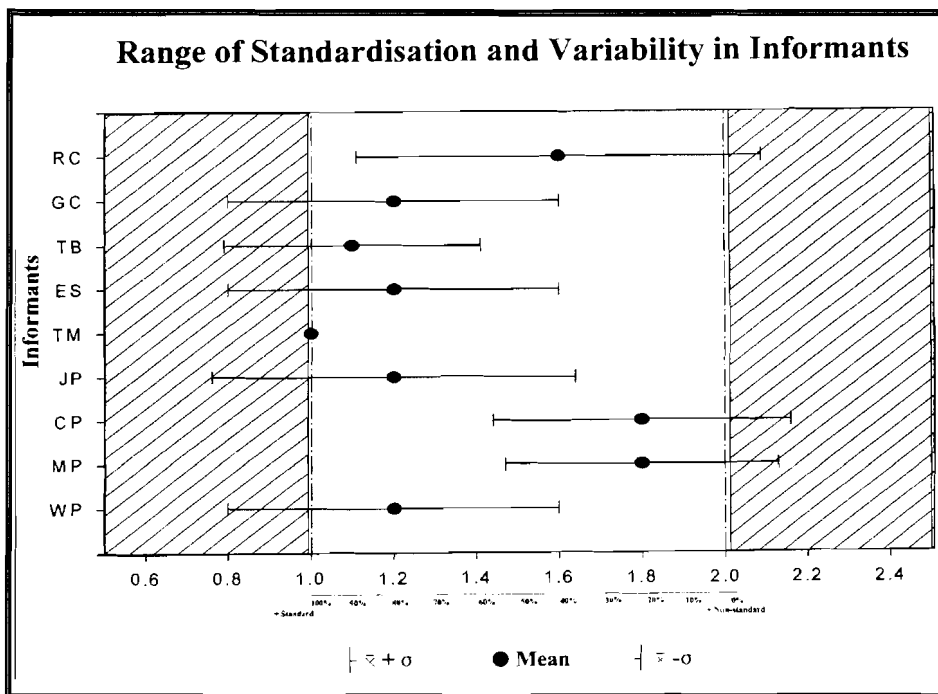


Figure 10: Graph obtained with the Statistical Package *Sigma-Plot for Windows* (ver. 3.06). The closer to the extreme points (standard and non-standard ends) the standardisation mean is, the smaller the spectrum (range) of variability. The closer to the middle point (centre) the standardisation mean is, the wider the spectrum of variability.

IV. CONCLUSION

We expect that this kind of large-scale research involving informants of different sex, age, social status, personal circumstances and geographical location, and using larger corpora — such as the New ICAME Corpus Collection (*Corpus of Early English Correspondence 1417-1681*) —,³ confirms the provisional overview offered in this tentative study, corroborating the idea that historical stages of language development were subject to constraints similar to those affecting contemporary speech communities. We also expect that the diverse geographical provenance of the letters and the association of each group of correspondents with a given ME dialect area may also allow us to apply geolinguistic methods — in the Trudgillian sense of Geolinguistics (1974, 1983) — and to find out about the geographical diffusion of the Chancery standard, provided that factors like population density and geographical distance can be traced. To the best of our knowledge no systematic attempt has been made at correlating the tenets and findings of sociolinguistics and geolinguistics with the establishment and consolidation of the Chancery standard in London and its progressive geographical diffusion from this most densely populated and highly functional urban centre to the rest of the country. Obviously, this is a difficult but not an illusive task, which does not mean, as we think we have proved in this paper, that awareness of social class and of prestigious norms, as well as the everyday contact and personal circumstances of individuals did not have an effect on personal or group attitudes to the different varieties prevalent in late ME. We believe, therefore, that the combination of sociolinguistics and geolinguistics may allow us to confirm the basic social patterns in the spread of linguistic innovations associated to the Chancery standard in late medieval England, and to establish the main nuclei of spatial diffusion.

NOTES:

1. The absence of letters by John III in the *Helsinki Corpus* has not allowed us to compare his written practices with those of John II. This would have been an interesting exercise in view of the contrasts between the two brothers regarding social life and mobility. John III (1444-1504) was also at the service of some noblemen — like the Duke of Norfolk — and often travelled throughout the country (Wales, Newcastle) and abroad (Bruges). However, from the 1470s he seems to have remained in Norfolk and, despite being appointed MP for this locality and sheriff of the county, he did not have contacts with the royalty, as his brother did. These differences may have affected their respective 'social networks' and be possibly connected with different degrees of adoption of the Chancery norm. We also regret that the lack of letters by this character in the corpus has not allowed us to confirm the conclusions reached by Davis, in the sense that in the late fifteenth century "a generally observed written standard was still far from attainment in the fairly reputable society represented by these two brothers" (1983: 28). It is obvious that no standard norm was definitely established by the time this generation of the Paston family reached its maturity, but, as we try to prove in this paper, the wider perspective offered by a long-time study may support the idea that standardisation advanced in a stable direction, and that it was the mobile members of the families that thrive in the social scale who show a greater degree of adherence to the incipient norms.

2. See Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (1996) for a number of historical studies based on the new *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* that rely on sociolinguistic methodology.

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APPENDIX I

DATA ON INFORMANTS AND QUANTIFICATION OF STANDARD/NON-STANDARD USAGE														
Informant	sex	Age	Geographical Location	Social Situation	Date of Letters	Context	Social Networks	Variable	standard form	non-standard form	Use of Standard Forms	Use of Non-standard Forms	Statistics ($p < 0.05$)	
William Paston I	male	47-52	Paston Norwich	middle-high professional	1425-1430	formal	weak and loose-knit	(sb)	74%	17/23	26%	6/23	79%	30.97
								(wb)	100%	29/29	0%	0/29	46.58	
								(u)	0%	0/6	100%	6/6		
Margaret Paston	female	?	Mauby Norwich	middle-high	1448-1449	informal	strong and close-knit	(sb)	72%	14/14	88%	100/114	87%	11.86
								(wb)	50%	4/8	50%	4/8	18.137	
								(u)	0%	0/15	100%	15/15		
Clement Paston II	male	19, 23	Norwich London	middle-high	1461-1464	informal	weak and loose-knit ?	(sb)	9%	3/33	91%	30/33	84%	16.70
								(wb)	74%	1/7	86%	6/7	7.43	
								(u)	100%	3/3	0%	0/3		
John Paston II	male	29, 30	Norwich Bomes Bures Calais Yarmouth	high courier soldier	1471-1472	informal	weak and loose-knit	(sb)	56%	20/36	44%	16/36	27%	21.25
								(wb)	100%	30/30	0%	0/30	51/70	
								(u)	25%	1/4	75%	3/4		

APPENDIX 2: Informants and their correspondence interaction in the Paston family context for the large-scale study.

