



# Intraindividual register variation in Early Modern English

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What is known as the “third wave” of variationist sociolinguistics focuses on the individual. In broad terms, individual variation comprises free variation and linguistically conditioned variation, on the one hand, and socially motivated variation, on the other (Werth *et al.* 2021). Applying these concepts to 17<sup>th</sup>-century English, this chapter analyses socio-pragmatically motivated intraindividual register variation in two case studies, one focusing on a startling departure from the expected norms of address term use, and the other on the writer’s variation in expressing degrees of emotional involvement. Both studies draw on a corpus of personal letters that provides rich metadata on the individual writers; in the second case, the findings are compared with the writer’s published work. Further consideration is given to corpus linguistic methods for retrieving intraindividual variation. Integrating the three waves of variationist sociolinguistics, access to a comparative baseline of the language community at large provides a means of assessing the multi-layered social evaluation of variation in individual usage.

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, historical sociolinguistics, personal correspondence, Elizabeth Stuart, Thomas Browne

## 1. Introduction

The variationist approach to sociolinguistics typically conceptualizes linguistic variation and change at three levels: the macro-level of the community, the meso-level of social networks, and the micro-level of the individual (e.g., Auer & Hinskens 2005; Nevalainen 2015: 249–250). Penelope Eckert (2012; 2019) identifies these foci in developmental terms as the first, second, and third wave of variationist sociolinguistics, tracing the transition of the field from the first-wave demographic determinants of linguistic variation to the third-wave conceptualization of linguistic variation in terms of social practices.

Foregrounding the complementarity of the three waves as being “part of the same ocean”, Schilling (2018: 340) remarks that language users can make social meaning by conveying both group associational and interactional meanings. Apart from purely linguistically conditioned variation (Werth *et al.* 2021), socially motivated variation can merge public demographic information such as the speaker’s regional dialect and their momentary context-bound practices that shape their language in interaction. Ultimately, Eckert (2019: 751) argues, sociolinguistic variation ranges from social category membership to momentary affective states.

The concept of *register* is instrumental in approaching and accounting for this wide range of potential sociolinguistic variation. As registers are defined as alternate ways of “saying ‘the same’ thing” considered appropriate to particular contexts of usage (Silverstein 2003: 212), socio-situational contexts provide a framework for recognizing register-specific patterns of language use – and deviations from them. Registers can be realized on different levels of specificity, ranging, for example, from differences between fictional prose and verse (Busse 2002) to variation based on the writer–recipient relationship and the purpose of writing in personal correspondence, both subjects addressed in the rich tradition of letter-writing manuals (Bannet 2008).

As intraindividual register variation springs from diverse contexts and motivations it moves on a scale from reactive to creative. Examples of the reactive kind would include the use of address terms determined by the social roles and power relations of the interlocutors in highly formal, status-marked contexts, such as court trials, with departures from these commonplaces giving rise to register interpretations of impoliteness or disrespect (Kryk-Kastovsky 2006; Nevalainen 1994). At the creative end of the scale may come the use of the second-person pronoun *thou* that, instead of reinforcing the

writer's critical comments, as it would do in early modern courtroom discourse, can serve to convey affection and banter among social intimates (Nevala 2018).

Highlighting its range of motivations, this chapter analyses intraindividual linguistic variation in two case studies of 17<sup>th</sup>-century English. The first one focuses on Elizabeth Stuart's startling departure from the expected norms of address term use in her personal correspondence, and the second discusses Sir Thomas Browne's variation in conveying degrees of emotional involvement among intimates and in public discourse. In both studies the observed linguistic variation is viewed as the writer's means of expressing their assessment of the appropriate register in a given communicative context.

Past socio-historical and pragmatic work on intraindividual variation is reviewed in Section 2, and Section 3 considers the material and methodological underpinnings of the field and the approaches adopted in this chapter; their details are discussed in Section 4. The two case studies present intraindividual variation of very different kinds: remarkable deviation from expected norms, on the one hand (4.1), and variation in encoding emotional involvement, on the other (4.2). Section 5 assesses intraindividual register variation and its possible social motives in the light of the research presented.

## 2. Past work and approaches

It is a commonly held view that intraindividual variation has been neglected in historical sociolinguistics (Schiegg & Huber 2023: 2). In practice the situation is much less bleak, but as past studies on the topic are typically informed by various philological, literary, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic frameworks, they would not have caught the attention of those departing from a three-wave variationist perspective (Bell 2016: 402–403). The following brief review of past work illustrates the material and methodological versatility of the research tradition and the range of the kinds of linguistic variation observed from syntax to spelling and from code-switching to ventriloquizing.

Focusing on a single individual, Raumolin-Brunberg (1991) explored intra-writer variation in the published and private writings of Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), including history, polemics, devotional prose, and public and private correspondence. The linguistic focus of the quantitative study was his noun-phrase use. On the basis of their NP characteristics More's texts could

be classified into three main groups, with groups (1) and (3) representing opposing tendencies: (1) history writing and private letters (high NP frequency, low NP coverage, short and simple NPs), (2) polemics and semiofficial letters, and (3) prayers and official letters (high NP coverage, long NPs, N heads with branching structures). The author concluded that these differences rarely followed genre divisions but could instead be accounted for in terms of multiple dimensions of variation (1991: 281).

Dramatists provide a popular source for the study of intra-writer variation. Ulrich Busse (2002) analysed *you* vs. *thou* variation in Shakespeare's works, in both drama and poetry, and constructed a typology of "thoufulness" by creating "a link between a statistically more or less probable form (*thou*) and its stylistic value as the marked term of the dyad" (2002: 288). He observed that *thou* dominated in verse and *you* in prose, which confirmed Shakespeare's poetry as an elevated register compared to his drama. The distinction also cut across drama in that History Plays and Tragedy emerged as the most "thouful" plays, while *you* prevailed in Comedies.

Nurmi and Pahta (2004) analysed code-switching, "the use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode", in correspondence in 1410–1550 and combined demographic and interactional perspectives in their work. At the community level, the authors found that nearly one in five of the writers studied code-switched in their letters, men more often than women. Code-switching was linked to the writer's social rank: members of the clergy and other writers with university education switched to Latin, while switching to French occurred in merchant letters. The study reported individual variation and micro-level interactional functions of code-switching within social groups. These intraindividual switches could create intimacy and establish group-membership but also occasionally served as a form of exclusion, confirming that "the explanations for variation do not lie exclusively with demographic variables" (Nurmi & Pahta 2004: 434, 448).

Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre, and García Vidal (2019) investigated spelling variation in the late 15<sup>th</sup>-century Paston Letters, concentrating on the replacement of <þ> by the incoming <th> among male writers. The process was a change from above in social terms, associated with the formality of the context and the high social rank of the addressee. The change was evidenced in intraindividual variation in that the writers showed upward accommodation to <th> when writing to recipients highest up on the social scale (nobility)

and to professionals, but downward accommodation to <p> when writing to social equals (lower gentry).

Nevalainen (2009) reported a unique instance of register switching where Lady Katherine Paston produced an imitation of the spoken words of a third party, as it were, by “ventriloquizing” them (cf. Tannen 2001). Conveying family news to her son William, who was studying away from home in the 1620s, she recounted an incident with little Philip, whose hands had been bitten by William’s [‘his master’s’] three puppies. She reproduced Philip’s words twice, transmitting to William a close imitation of the child’s speech: “his Nastas goggs did dite ha hans”, and again: “nasta lillo goggs did dite his hans” (1).

- 1 he cam with tears in his eies to me and sayd: his Nastas goggs did dite ha hans: I was desirous onc more to heer his pretty playnt: he cried nasta lillo goggs did dite his hans: your 3. pupis weare so bowld with him: (CEEC, Katherine Paston to William Paston, 1627?; PastonK 99)

Some more expected register variation emerged when Lady Katherine’s “*thouful*” letters to William, characterized by terms of endearment, praise, and humor, were compared with her adult-directed language in the letters she wrote to her male relatives. For example, she always addressed them with the second-person pronoun *you*.

Showing that methodological and conceptual pluralism continue to mark the field, the papers presented in Schiegg and Huber (2023) include, for example, patterns of variation in discourse-ending formulae, self-corrections as stylistic choices in a draft letter, and spelling variation of Middle English scribes. In her contribution, Iyeyri (2023) regards intra-text variation as an instance of intra-writer variation in Middle English manuscripts. Viewed from the perspective of texts, her analysis might be extended to variation in the philological principles of editing manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Pahta (1998: 151) puts the text editor’s role in a nutshell: “Decisions on editorial methods reflect on both the substance of the text and on the representation of its linguistic realisation.” Now twenty-six years on, the research community thanks Päivi not only for her insightful early editorial work but also for her leading-edge scholarship that ranges from historical multilingualism and socio-pragmatics to

### 3. Material and methods

As the studies discussed illustrate, corpus linguistics provides the foundation especially for quantitative studies in intraindividual variation. Discussing the complex relationship between social roles and language practices in the study of Late Modern English, Pahta *et al.* (2010: 9) endorse the use of corpora and corpus methodology for two main reasons: corpus data and techniques make it possible “to observe differences in usage between data sets, as well as to reveal lexical and grammatical characteristics of the text that are not immediately observable to the reader but still form an important part of the style of the text”. Systematic text comparisons provide a good heuristic tool, they argue, because “linguistic features indexing identity and social roles may encompass a variety of linguistic phenomena [...], but it is difficult to know beforehand which will be relevant in a given situation”.

This is also at issue with intraindividual register variation more broadly, especially when it operates on a wider set of register-defining phenomena than single linguistic features. Community-level studies of corpora based on ego-documents such as personal letters provide the basis for comparing individual practices and help detect outliers whose usage deviates significantly from the average community or group-level norms.<sup>2</sup> Investigating the use of address terms in the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC), Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1995) also paid attention to correspondents whose usage departed from the attested norms. One of them was Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia, who was selected as the subject of the first case study in this chapter. The outlier approach to individual variation was also explored in the studies based on the CEEC discussed in Nevalainen, Palander-Collin, and Säily (2018). This comparison revealed Sir Thomas Browne’s variable use of linguistic features, which contrasted the letters he wrote to his son and daughter. He is the subject of the second case study in this chapter. Both case studies draw on the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence*. Sir Thomas Browne’s letters are, moreover, compared with his published work,

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the special language of medical writing, and from Middle English to the use of English in Finland today. Long may that work continue.

- 2 Community-level register variation has also been studied in multigenre corpora, for example, by means of a multidimensional analysis of the co-occurrence of a large number of linguistic features. Douglas Biber has applied this MD-method to a variety of corpora, including one of 18<sup>th</sup> century English (Biber 2001); cf. 4.2, below.

and where possible, Elizabeth Stuart’s personal letters are quoted from a recent diplomatic edition.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in these case studies. Furthermore, corpus data can be explored by means of diverse visualization techniques at various stages of the study from data exploration to interpreting the (socio)linguistic patterns that emerge from the analysis of the data (Siirtola *et al.* 2011; Sönning & Schützler 2023). A simple word-cloud heuristic is used in Section 4.2, where Thomas Browne’s private and public writings are compared, showing that corpus-based distant reading combined with close reading can help discover and contextualize fine-tuned intraindividual register variation.

## 4. Two case studies

The studies to be discussed follow the basic sociolinguistic tenet that individuals vary their language use according to the communicative situation. In essence, descriptions of community-level sociolinguistic variation therefore rest on individual variation. Discussing women’s letter writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Daybell (2010: 67) concludes that “[f]actors such as rank, social status, local and wider influence, and the nature of the correspondence had as much, if not more, impact than gender on the tone of the letter”. All these various factors are illustrated in the correspondence of Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia.

### 4.1. Elizabeth Stuart: Departing from expected norms

Elizabeth Stuart (1596–1662), the only surviving daughter of King James VI of Scotland and I of England, was married to Fredrick V (1596–1632), the Protestant ruler of the Palatinate, who accepted the throne of Bohemia in 1619. However, the following year he was deposed and expelled as part of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants that escalated into the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). As the Spanish occupation of the Palatinate made them stateless, Fredrick and Elizabeth and their large family lived in exile in the Netherlands, unsuccessfully trying to regain their territory in the Palatinate. In England, Elizabeth came to be known as a champion of the Protestant faith, and due to her short reign in Bohemia, she was dubbed as the “Winter

Queen”. Asch (2016) notes that she had “a considerable talent to inspire admiration, loyalty, and love in Germany as well as England”, which earned her the title of the “Queen of Hearts” (cf. Akkerman 2021).

Much of the work that Elizabeth undertook to promote the Palatine cause was carried out by means of correspondence. The forms of address in her letters varied, as would be expected, according to the recipient. For example, she addressed her male relatives partly in formal terms “Sire” or “Most gracious soveraygn and deare father” (her father, King James I), with routine affection “My only dear brother” (her brother, Charles I), or simply “Sonne” (her son, Charles Louis, the Elector Palatine after the death of his father Fredrick V). The courtiers, diplomats, and noblemen she corresponded with were typically addressed as “My Lord”. But Elizabeth also showed creative language use and remarkable intraindividual register variation when, writing to James Hay, Earl of Carlisle, in 1630, she addressed the older courtier and diplomat as “Thou ugly, filthy camel’s face”. This letter, dated the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1630, runs as follows (Green 1857: 482–483):

- 2    Thou ugly filthy camel’s face,  
 You chid me once for not writing to you; now I have my revenge and more justly chide you; for not having heard from you so long as I fear you have forgot to write. I have charged this fat fellow to tell you all this, and that I cannot forget your villainy. He can inform (you) how all things are here, and what they say to the peace with Spain; and though I confess I am not much rejoiced at it, yet I am so confident of my dear brother’s love, and the promise he hath made me, not to forsake our cause, that it troubles me the less. I must desire your sweet face to continue your help to us, in this business which concerns me so near; and in spite of you, I am ever constantly
- Your most affectionat frend  
 Elizabeth<sup>3</sup>

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3    Transcribed from the subscription in Elizabeth’s own hand appended to Green’s modern-spelling edition of the letter, which is not included in Nadine Akkerman’s excellent original-spelling edition, as a rule cited here. Mary Anne Everett Green was Elizabeth’s first biographer and one of the most prolific editors of the *Calendar of State Papers* (Akkerman 2021: 4–5).

The recipient of the letter, James Hay (c. 1580–1636), the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Carlisle, shown in Figure 1, was a courtier and favourite of both James I and Charles I, and undertook various diplomatic missions for them both. He had arrived in England with King James and, although he successfully blended into his new surroundings, Schreiber (2008) comments that he was “a singularly ineffective diplomat”, unable, for example, “to negotiate the return of the palatine family to its German territory”.

Not having received the word from Carlisle she had been expecting, Elizabeth has cause to chide him in (2) just as he had done on an earlier occasion when she had failed to write to him. She retaliates by addressing him with the second-person singular pronoun *thou*, which could give rise to various readings from affection and intimacy to condescension and disrespect. Combined with the following “ugly filthy camel’s face”, the salutation would strongly suggest the latter interpretation.



**Figure 1.** James Hay, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Carlisle (National Galleries of Scotland; CC BY-NC).

However, contrary to what the impolite term might lead one to assume, the beginning of the letter could also be read as friendly banter rather than a personal insult, as Elizabeth chides Carlisle for the “villainy” of failing to write to her, greeting him with the nickname she also employs elsewhere in her correspondence with Carlisle.<sup>4</sup> But as she goes on to discuss the treaty with Spain that was made on terms unfavorable to her husband, the salutation could preface her frustration not only at Carlisle’s failure to write to her but also, perhaps more seriously, to help ensure a positive outcome in the Spanish affair.

Mary Anne Everett Green (1857: 482), Elizabeth’s first biographer, takes the letter as evidence of the patience with which Elizabeth resigned herself to her circumstances. This is borne out in the second half of the letter that records Elizabeth’s personal reaction to the political situation. However, as she also needs to be able to rely on Carlisle’s continued help in the future, she changes her initial “ugly, filthy Camel’s face” to “your sweet face” at the end of the letter, signing off as “Your affectinat frend”. This expression, with some modification of the adjective, was Elizabeth’s routine subscription formula, followed by her signature. As Nevala (2009: 89) comments, in personal correspondence “friend” does not necessarily imply a close friendship; in fact, acquaintances and more distant recipients are referred to as “friends” more often than intimates. After her singular creativity in the salutation, Elizabeth returns to a reactive, formulaic expression of goodwill at the end.

Although “ugly filthy camel’s face” does not seem to occur in the salutation of Elizabeth’s other surviving letters, she uses it in the body of several extant letters addressed to Carlisle. An earlier letter, dated the 18 March 1630, gives more background to the treaty with Spain and also to Elizabeth’s level of (in)formality with Carlisle. Here the salutation is the expected “My Lord” and, unlike in (2), Elizabeth also has reason to thank Carlisle for having received his letter. She takes up the treaty with Spain towards the end of her letter in (3), expressing her reliance on both King Charles and Carlisle being able to further the pro-Palatine cause (Akkerman, 2015: 800–801). The letter closes

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4 In line with the tone of the beginning of the letter, Elizabeth also mentions “this fat fellow”, Sir Henry Vane, who was to deliver her message to Carlisle. Akkerman (2015: 804) mentions that she often used the adjective *fat* to describe both Vane and Sir Thomas Roe.

with Elizabeth's continued appreciation of Carlisle, and ends in her appealing to him by using his nickname "honest worthy camels face":

- 3 I heere the treatie with Spaine goeth one, you know my minde, that I ame still incredulous that they will doe anie thing, except it be vppon dishonourable conditions, but I ame confident that the king my g deare Brother will not suffer anie such thing to be ~~thought~~<sup>spoken</sup> ~~one~~, for and that you will doe all you can in it, for I haue euer found you so true a frend to me in all occasions as binds me euer to be honest worth>y< camels face

Your constant affectionat  
Frend  
Elizabeth

Elizabeth also repeats the nickname in other letters, both before and after the conclusion of the Spanish treaty. On 29 May 1629, she finished her letter to Carlisle: "I will loose no meanes whereby I may shew your ouglie Camels face that I ame Your most constant frend Elizabeth" (Akkerman 2015: 745). As late as in the mid-1630s, she concluded her letter using the nickname and assuring her reliance on Carlisle's good judgement:<sup>5</sup>

- 4 I ame so confident of your loue, and you so much power with me, as for your sake I shall euer esteeme those you recommend to me beleeeue this worthie Camels face of her that is euer

Your most constant frend  
Elizabeth

We may conclude that the startling sobriquet was a peculiar form of endearment that Elizabeth only applied to Carlisle. She could use it to evoke different readings in the salutation of the letter and in the closing address at the end. Used in the salutation with *thou* in (2), it could be interpreted as banter with some critical undertones in that particular context, whereas at the end it routinely confirmed the good relations between the writer and the recipient of the letter. There is no way of knowing how and when the peculiar

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5 Akkerman (2011: 372) dates the letter between the end of November 1633 and 23 November 1635.

usage came about, but Akkerman (2021: 9) mentions that Elizabeth, like her parents, was in the habit of using nicknames as terms of endearment. For example, she also addressed Sir Thomas Rowe, her closest confidant at the royal court, not only as “My Lord” and “Good S<sup>r</sup> Thomas Roe” but also as “Honest Thom Roe” and even “Honest fatte Thom” (cf. Akkerman 2015: 804).

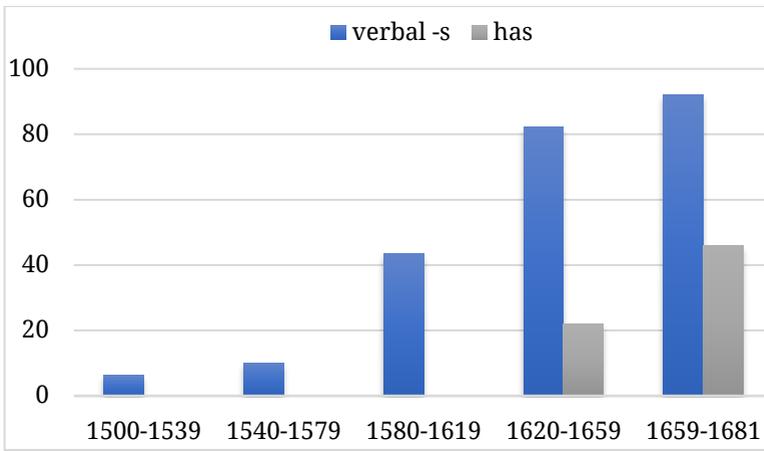
In their community-level analysis of the use of address terms in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1995: 589) conclude that positive orientation is available to social superiors regardless of social distance and that the range of positive address forms such as nicknames is practically open-ended. It is, however, noteworthy that their mutual selection is only licensed by the close distance of the correspondents. This was particularly true of members of the royal family, whose informal terms of address could never be reciprocated by their subjects.

## 4.2. Thomas Browne: Varying degrees of involvement

As discussed in 4.1, in personal correspondence register variation is observed in address terms, which are usually in harmony with the register choices in the body of the letter. Other possible cues to register variation include linguistic features undergoing change over time, as incoming and outgoing features are often associated with different social meanings. Analysing outliers, individuals who deviated from the community norm, proved a useful discovery method for intraindividual variation in a study of the tail end of the diffusion of verbal *-s* in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Nevalainen 2018).

Figure 2 shows that the verb *have* (both main verb and auxiliary) was much slower in showing the incoming form than the bulk of other verbs in the CEEC: in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the other verbs had already passed the 80%-mark, in *has -s* had reached the frequency of 20% and was only nearing 50% in the second half of the century. Variation could naturally be found at the level of individual writers. One of those who used the outgoing *hath* form more frequently than most writers in the twenty-year period from 1680 to 1699 was Sir Thomas Browne, who also showed intraindividual variation by using the incoming variant *has* a few times in his private correspondence.

Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), was a medical doctor, polymath, and a notable author who was knighted for his merits by Charles II in 1671. Born in London, he came from the merchant ranks: his father was a liveryman of the



**Figure 2.** The spread of verbal -s (%) in the language community (modified from Nevalainen 2018).

Mercers' Company, and after his death, Thomas's education became primarily the responsibility of his uncle, who was a grocer. Browne studied in Oxford and on the continent specialized in medicine in Montpellier, Padua, and Leiden. He set up his practice in Norwich in 1637, where he married Dorothy Mileham (1621–1685) in 1641 (Barbour 2013; Robbins 2008).

Much of Browne's preserved private correspondence is addressed to his sons, Edward (1644–1708) and Tom (1647–1667?), with a few letters to his daughter Elizabeth (b. 1648). His eldest son Edward followed in his father's footsteps as a physician. He lived and practised in London but also travelled widely abroad, as did Tom, who died young. After her marriage to George Lyttelton in 1680, Elizabeth moved to live in Guernsey. In the CEEC, *has*, the incoming third-person singular variant of *have* only appeared in Browne's letters to Elizabeth ("Betty"), while *hath* was the sole form found in letters addressed to his other correspondents, including his son Edward. The passages quoted in (5), addressed to Betty, and (6), addressed to Edward are dated the same day, 6 June 1681, and largely contain the same family news. They provide a clear case of Browne's register variation shown not only in his use of different forms of *have* (shown in bold) but also in other linguistic features.

## 5 Dearest Betty,

Thy letters are still our best diversion, to hear you and all that belong to you gat so well to Portsmouth was very wellcom to us, yr thoughts for us are Equald with ours for you. I am sure their Passes not a day that we are not severall times talking of you. Poor Tomeys Cough **have** brought him in to a great heat, but I hope it will not be so bad as that feavor was wch you were so helpfull to him; his stomack very bad, we are this after noon goeing to bath [him] by his own desire. Our Tommy **has** had a grievous Cof and feavor; yr sister Frank **has** dun more for him then I could have thought; he was bled and bathd and I bless God he had got down amongst us again and is much delighted with yr Letters. (CEEC, Sir Thomas Browne to his daughter Mrs. Elizabeth Lyttelton, 6 June 1681; Browne, 194)<sup>6</sup>

## 6 D. S.,

Mr Deane Astley went to London on this day was sevenight, and sayd hee would call upon you. [...] This day, God bee thancked, wee had a fine showre of raine; the spouts of our howse have not Runne for 8 or 9 weekes before. I had a cough for 6 weekes very feirce in the night and it held mee till within these 12 or 14 dayes, most persons in my howse had it or have it except my wife. Frank **hath** it and it **hath** been with hooping and vomiting, butt is persua[dable] to take litle and will not abstaine from going to morning and evening prayers which wee daylie have at our owne parish church. Tommy **hath** had it with some hooping and vomiting, butt now vomits butt seldome, butt sleepes prettie well in the night and at any time when hee lyeth downe in the day; hee **hath** been very hot and so that hee beggd to bleed a litle and to goe into a *balneum dulce* which [he] had used in a sicknesse before. (CEEC, Sir Thomas Browne to his son Dr. Edward Browne, 6 June 1681; Browne, 192–193)

Word clouds may be used to explore the lexical variation that characterizes the two passages, which can be suggestive of subregisters within the

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6 The letter to Elizabeth is here quoted in its extant, full form, but the longer one to Edward is shortened in the middle to make the passages comparable in length and content.



In the letter to Betty (5) the pronoun *you* stands out, suggesting orientation towards the recipient, whereas in the letter to Edward (6) the pronoun *it* is more prominent, pointing to a focus on things, in this case the particular disease that several family members had suffered from. This subject was of particular interest to Edward not only as a physician but also because the illness had affected his son Tommy, who was staying with his grandparents and is referred to as *hee* in the topic position in the sentence in (6). Tommy is also the referent of *him* in the letter to Betty (5), suggesting the semantic roles of both patient and beneficiary, foregrounding the care the other family members provided in restoring him back to health.

Both passages show frequent use of *and* and *to*. In both, the prominence of *to* arises from grammatical constructions that require the use of the preposition or particle. The conjunction *and* dominates in the letter to Edward. Most of the time Browne employs it as a clause-linking device as he describes how each family member had suffered from the illness. No similar structure marking with *and* is found in the letter to Betty.

The lexical choices in the two letters reveal further subregister differences. Betty is addressed as *Dearest Betty* and her letters (*thy letters*) are mentioned with particular appreciation at the beginning. Edward, in turn, is greeted casually with *D.S.*, an abbreviation of *Dear(est) Son*, but the letter opens with a piece of news of Mr. Deane Astley's London visit. The two letters also differ in some of their third-party references, which are more involved in the letter to Betty: *our Tommy* and *yr sister Frank* in (5) as opposed to plain *Tommy* or *Tom* and *Frank* in (6), where the first-person possessive *my* appears in *my house* and, interestingly, *my wife*, with reference to Edward's mother, Dorothy Browne. In this passage, which is concerned with the writer's own illness, the letter recipient is phased out.

That Browne's use of *has* and *hath* correlates with his other lexical choices can be seen in his use of involvement features such as first- and second-person pronouns, private verbs, and degree adverbs and adjectives (cf. Biber 2001). The differences are not absolute but stand out when comparing the latter halves of the letters to Betty in (7) and (8), and to Edward in (9) and (10).

Apart from including the East Anglian dialectal third-person suffixless form *have*, (7) contains *I*, *you*, and *we*, the verb *hope*, the intensifier *very* and two instances of *so*, as well as several evaluative adjectives (*bad*, *great*, *helpful*,

*poor*). With two instances of *has*, (8) presents first- and second-person pronouns and determiners, the verbs *bless* and *think*, the degree words *more* and *much*, and the adjectives *delighted* and *grievous*.

- 7 **Poor** Tomeys Cough **have** brought him in to a **great** heat, but **I hope** it will not be **so bad** as that feavor was wch **you** were **so helpfull** to him; his stomack **very bad**, **we** are this after noon goeing to bath [{him}] by his own desire.
- 8 (**Our** Tommy **has** had a **grievous** Cof and feavor, **yr** sister Frank **has** dun **more** for him then **I could have thought**; he was bled and bathd and **I bless God** he had got down amongst **us** again and is **much delighted** with **yr** Letters.

By contrast, the contexts of *hath* in the letter to Edward in (9) and (10) lack first- and second-person pronouns except in the aside mentioning the daily prayers the family members (*wee*) have in their (*our*) parish church (9). Compared to the letter Browne wrote to Betty, the lack of private verbs and the scarcity of degree adverbs and adjectives are noticeable with only two instances of *very*, one earlier in (6) where Browne talks about his own cough, and the other in (10) where he describes Tommy's fever. The other intensifier he has is the vague – boosting or downtoning – use of *pretty* in *pretty well*. He also downplays the severity of Tommy's illness in expressions such as *some whooping, but seldom*, and *bleed a little* (10).

- 9 (Frank **hath** it and it **hath** been with hooping and vomiting, butt is persua[dable] to take **litle** and will not abstaine from going to morning and evening prayers which **wee** daylie have at **our** owne parish church.
- 10 (Tommy **hath** had it with **some** hooping and vomiting, butt now vomits **butt seldome**, butt sleepes **prettie well** in the night and at any time when hee lyeth downe in the day; hee **hath** been **very** hot and so that hee beggd to bleed **a litle** and to goe into a *balneum dulce* which [he] had used in a sicknesse before.

Comparing the descriptions of illness in the two letters shows the writer's varying degrees of emotional involvement and detachment: the Betty letter

discloses the severity of Tommy's illness as well as Browne's hopes and fears concerning it, whereas the letter to Edward gives a more detached account of the disease that both his sister Frank and son Tommy have. There may have been several reasons for these subregister choices. The writer may not have wanted Edward to be unduly worried about his son, who was on the mend. Equally likely, the more businesslike register may have been his usual mode of writing to his son, with whom he was in the habit of communicating on a wide variety of scientific topics.

Comparing the two letters further, Browne's subregister choices could also be interpreted as reflections of his understanding of the social roles and identities of his children: Betty's role as a carer appears in (5), as does that of her sister Frank. Neither of them is mentioned in that role in Browne's letter to his son, whom he rather approaches collegially as a medical practitioner, explicitly signalled by the use of the Latin phrase *balneum dulce* ('sweet bath').

Thomas Browne's ability to enact his social role as a scholar and medical practitioner is amply demonstrated in his published work. He is particularly well known for a book that is regarded as a precursor of popular scientific writing entitled *Pseudodoxia Epidemica or, Enquiries into Very Many Received Tenents and Commonly Presumed Truths* (1646). In it, Browne aimed to promote reason and the scientific method and to rectify common misconceptions. The publication ran into six editions between 1646 and 1672 and was translated into several languages, including Latin. Browne noted in the preface that the text was intended for the Gentry, specifically to "the knowing and leading part of Learning". Testifying to his linguistic sensitivity, he acknowledged the difficulty that general readers might find with his language as "the quality of the Subject will sometimes carry us into expressions beyond meere English apprehensions" (Robbins 2008).

Thomas Browne's published work bears witness to his lexical creativity, being credited as the 73<sup>rd</sup> most cited source in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In all, 761 quotations are found to provide first evidence of a word, and 1,558 first evidence of a particular meaning.<sup>8</sup> Typically of a scientific or medical nature, Browne's contributions include words such as *ambidextrous*, *analogous*, *ascetic*, *carnivorous*, *coexistence*, *compensate*, *cryptography*, *cylindrical*,

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8 OED3, last accessed 14 July 2023.

*disruption, electricity, ferocious, hallucination, herbaceous, insecurity, locomotion, polarity, precocious, pubescent, suicide, therapeutic, and veterinarian.* He borrowed or derived the words and their senses from sources where most of them were used in professional circles in their Latin, Greek, or French forms. He was probably also an early adopter of words that were already in use in English at the time.

The passage from the preface to *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in (11) illustrates the register that Browne adopted when addressing his reader. The conservative third-person singular present-tense suffix is *-th* not only in *doth* and *hath*, as in the letter to Edward, but also in lexical verbs (*leadeth, requireth*). The other items in boldface, *medicall*, *Vroscopy*, and *paradoxologie* (*OED*: ‘The action or habit of indulging in or propounding paradoxes’), are listed by the *OED* as lexical innovations first attested in English in this text.<sup>9</sup>

- 11 Some consideration we hope from the course of our Profession, which though it **leadeth** us into many truths that passe undiscerned by others, yet **doth** it disturbe their communications, and much interrupt the office of our pens in their well intended transmissions: and therefore surely in this worke attempts will exceed performances: it being composed by snatches of time, as **medicall** vacations, and the fruitlesse impertunity of **Vroscopy** would permit us. And therefore also perhaps it **hath** not found that regular and constant stile, those infallible experiments, and those assured determinations, which the subject sometime **requireth**, and might be expected from others, whose quiet doors and unmolested hours afford no such distractions. Although whoever shall indifferently perpend the exceeding difficulty, which either the obscurity of the subject, or unavoidable **paradoxologie** must often put upon the Attemptor, will easily discern, a worke of this nature is not to be performed upon one legge, and should smell of oyle if duly and deservedly handled. (*Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Part I, *To the Reader*)

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9 However, some earlier 17<sup>th</sup>-century attestations of *medical* are found in Early English Books Online (<https://earlyprint.org/lab/>).



## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Several approaches can be adopted to account for intraindividual variation and register choices in socio-pragmatic terms. One is the individual's understanding of their social roles and those of their interlocutors, and the ways in which this understanding can be harnessed in social meaning making. Pahta *et al.* (2010: 1) stress the negotiability of social roles in interaction:

Particular social roles can imply particular linguistic choices that are appropriate to enact those roles, but at the same time individuals can make linguistic choices and mobilize parts of their linguistic repertoire to index, negotiate and construct their social roles.

The social role aspect provides one possible approach to Sir Thomas Browne's (sub)register differences when reporting basically the same news to his son and daughter. We may assume that his experience as a widely published scholar, a practicing medical doctor, and a father of a large family, must have contributed to his susceptibility to a wide range of register variation. His ability to use different registers may therefore be detected in the way he fine-tuned the two letters to correspond to their recipients' social worlds and his own role in them, whereas his public role as a scholar addressing a wide readership made further demands and set different constraints on his register choices in print.

Another, related basis for interpretation is the degree of intimacy *vs.* distance that marks the relations of the interlocutors. It can be judged on external criteria such as family membership, but power differences that affect the degree of intimacy and emotional involvement are found both within the family and outside it. In personal correspondence these distinctions are in part subject to traditional genre conventions and more marked in earlier periods than in more recent times (Nevalainen 2001; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 1995). However, just like the expression of social roles, the writer can monitor the intimacy *vs.* distance axis for various effects, as could be seen in the case of Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia, who deftly used her striking nickname for the Earl of Carlisle in letter salutation to let him understand her affective state and reaction to his inaction (cf. Eckert 2019: 751).

As shown by the studies discussed in this chapter, personal letters continue to provide a rich source for research into intraindividual variation.

One way of broadening the scope of the field would be to have access to corpora that consist of different genres and registers authored by one and the same individual. This principle was applied here in the comparison of Sir Thomas Browne's private and public writings. In general, including extensive metadata on the writers' backgrounds in historical corpora would enable the exploration of the possible social correlates of intraindividual variation in their multilayered contexts. Here visualization techniques could also help to discover "characteristics of the text that are not immediately observable to the reader" (Pahta *et al.* 2010: 9).

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