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Scribes as Agents of Change: Copying Practices in Administrative Texts from Fifteenth-Century Coventry[1]

Tino Oudesluijs

This essay, which is a part of the Emerging Standards Project,[2] compares two versions of an administrative text from Late Medieval Coventry in order to scrutinise the way in which the copyist changed or maintained the language of the original. Through close reading and quantitative comparisons, this study reveals that copyists have mostly influenced the orthography and morphology of administrative texts. It furthermore shows that the manuscript context should also be considered as a likely external influence when it comes to the lexical level. Finally, it is argued that the influence of the exemplar on the individual copying scribe should not be ignored.

Keywords: historical sociolinguistics, Middle English, copying practices, manuscripts

1. Introduction

When scrutinising the English language in various texts from the Middle English period (c. 1100-1500), it quickly becomes apparent that variation – in particular spelling variation – is the rule rather than the excep-

[1] I would like to thank Jacob Thaisen, Alpo Honkapohja, and the anonymous reviewers for commenting on earlier versions of this article.

[2] See emergingstandards.eu/ for more information.

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tion. This variation in writing is predominantly due to the various spoken dialects in the Middle English period (cf. Williamson), the lack of a standardised written variety across the country (cf. McIntosh et al.; Milroy and Milroy Ch. 1, 2; Bergs, "Middle English Sociolinguistics"; Schaefer), and the fact that many texts were copied at least once, which often resulted in a so-called *Mischsprache*, or mixed language (cf. McIntosh et al. Ch. 3.5). As pointed out by McIntosh, a scribe who copied a text could do one of three things:

> 1) leave the language more or less unchanged, like a modern scholar transcribing such a manuscript. This appears to happen somewhat rarely.
> 2) convert it into his own kind of language, making innumerable modifications to the orthography, the morphology, and the vocabulary. This happens commonly.
> 3) do something somewhere between 1 and 2. This also happens commonly. (McIntosh 60)

The way in which scribes copied documents in the Middle Ages thus has a significant impact on our understanding of the languages and dialects from that time, as it is crucial to know whose language it is that we are looking at when trying to determine how language variation and change worked in the past. Understanding copying practices better helps us to determine not only the social and geographical distribution of linguistic variation (synchronic), but it can also tell us something about the likely direction of ongoing linguistic changes over time (diachronic). For example, when we consider a text written by scribe A in location B and in year C, we can analyse its language and compare it to that of other texts – about which we have similar metadata – within the social, geographical and temporal dimensions in which linguistic variation and change take place (cf. Berruto 226-27). I will not discuss the situational dimension in which variation and change can also occur, since – in the case of written language – this concerns different text types or registers. My focus will be on linguistic variation and change within, rather than across, specific text types, as I only consider original texts and their subsequent copies.

Unfortunately, when considering Middle English, most of the surviving texts have come down to us as copies made by anonymous scribes rather than the originals (Horobin, "Mapping the Words" 61; Horobin, "The Nature of Material Evidence"; Milroy, "Middle English Dialectology" 188). Moreover, it is often impossible to know for sure how many other copies of a text were once in existence, and which ones – if not the original itself – would have been used to create the copies we now

have left. This makes it extremely difficult for historical (socio)linguists to determine whose language it is that we are looking at: (a) that of the author of the original text, (b) that of the scribe who copied it, or (c) a mixture of both. The little evidence that we have suggests that many copyists regularly changed the language at least in part, if not completely. It is thus often the case that historical (socio)linguists deal with a so-called "mixed language" when scrutinising Middle English texts (McIntosh et al. Ch. 3).

Given the importance of these implications concerning the influences of copying scribes on the Middle English language, historical (socio)linguists have regularly addressed this issue (e.g. McIntosh et al.; Horobin, "Mapping the Words"; Bergs, *Writing, Reading, Language Change*; Milroy, "Middle English Dialectology"). Despite the fact that we often know very little about the copying scribes other than their profession, these scholars have found ways to successfully determine the circumstances in which the scribes would have been copying, as well as the possible influences on the linguistic structure of the texts that they produced (Laing and Lass; Peikola; Thaisen and Rutkowska; Wagner et al.). We know for example that scribes could copy the original text directly from the original, but also via dictation, from drafts on which they could elaborate, or simply from a list of key words (Bergs, *Writing, Reading, Language Change* 246). Moreover, recent palaeographical research has contributed much to our understanding of the circumstances and ways in which scribes copied texts (cf. Wakelin, "Writing the Words"; Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*). An example of this is the notion that copying scribes could consciously change or preserve certain features of a text by introducing new conventions or adhering to old ones based on a variety of factors (e.g. contemporary ideologies, nature of the text, intended audience), thus affecting the linguistic variation in the text.

Until today, most of the texts under scrutiny in relation to this topic have concerned literary texts such as *Piers Plowman, The Prick of Conscience* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, poetry (cf. Wakelin, "Writing the Words" 53-55; Wakelin, *Scribal Correction* 45-48), and sometimes personal correspondence (Nevalainen; Bergs, *Writing, Reading, Language Change*; Horobin, "The Nature of Material Evidence") and chronicles (Bergs, *Writing, Reading, Language Change*). Although some generalisations regarding copying practices for other genres such as civic records and similar local administrative writings can definitely be made based on these findings, few studies have touched upon examples of scribal copying behav-

iour in local administrative texts in great detail,[3] despite the fact that they make up a large part of the remaining written evidence from the Middle English period. When considering the intended audiences and the role that such texts played in society, one could assume that scribes may have treated them differently from other genres.

Because of this under-researched aspect in previous studies with regard to administrative writings (texts such as agreements, leases, reports, civic records, wills, etc.), and the fact that these texts form a significant part of the overall Late Middle English written evidence that has survived to date, in this essay I will focus on an administrative text in order to determine to what extent scribes could change the language when copying something other than what has previously been studied in this light. I will do so by looking at a survey written in Coventry in 1423 and a copy made by a different scribe almost 100 years later in 1520 in the same place, when all of the original documents were copied into a new book, namely the Coventry Leet Book. This comparison will allow me to determine to what extent the second scribe changed the language of the source material on various levels, i.e. orthography, morphology, syntax and lexis. Moreover, as I have more data from both the copying scribe and other scribes working in Coventry on similar texts in the same book in the first half of the sixteenth century, I will be able to determine to what extent the differences may be due to a diachronic change of scribal conventions in Coventry in general, or due to the personal preferences of the scribe, since I can compare the copy to other copies that he made around that time.

In the following sections I will first consider Late Medieval English copying practices in general, based on various texts from all over England (Section 2), before turning to the local copying practices and scribes working in Coventry (Sections 3 and 4), and finally the two versions of the survey and my linguistic analysis of them (Section 5). In the last two sections I will discuss the results (Section 6) and present some conclusions (Section 7).

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[3] Wakelin (*Scribal Correction* 87-94) briefly discusses urban clerks – about whom he states that they would have copied documentary texts rather accurately compared to literary works due to their content – but not much more. I must add here that, despite the fact that literary works have generally evoked more interest from the academic community, administrative texts have often formed the cornerstone of seminal resources for the Late Medieval period, including LALME (Angus et al.), LAEME (Laing), MEG-C (Stenroos et al.), and MELD (Stenroos et al.). As noted before, in such projects, the issue of scribal copying practices is often addressed (e.g. McIntosh et al.), albeit not always to the same extent compared to other, more literary, works.

2. Late Medieval English copying practices

As mentioned earlier, scribes could generally copy documents in a number of different ways in the Late Medieval period (cf. Bergs, *Writing, Reading, Language Change* 246). An important method that should be mentioned in the context of copying practices is internal dictation (cf. Wakelin, "Writing the Words" 51, 55). Internal dictation could have been used when scribes were copying in cursive scripts (as is the case with the Survey of the Commons, see also Section 5 below), as they were then able to look at – and subsequently remember – multiple words at a time when copying a text, rather than copying it letter by letter or word by word (often depending on how difficult the script was). This means that the written mode influences the copy only indirectly as the scribes were instead copying from their internal dictation. Thus, using cursive scripts may have enforced "dialectal translation"[4] (cf. Benskin and Laing 90, 94), when scribes were copying them. However, it should be noted that not all changes in copies reflect such "dialectal translation," as some would reflect visual elements such as the replacement of <th> with thorn <þ>, or vice versa (cf. Benskin 14).

When considering the general trends with regard to copying practices in Medieval England, we must also not assume that copyists were always trying to follow the original word for word (Wakelin, *Scribal Correction* 20, 77, 162-70). When copying, scribes were often encouraged to correct and alter the original text – especially in the religious settings in which most scribes worked until the fourteenth century. After that century, scribes started working as clerks for local councils as well. With regard to corrections in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English texts, Wakelin (*Scribal Correction* 162-65) points out that it is somewhat surprising to see that scribes also sometimes tinkered with spellings and grammatical forms even though the original forms were not uncommon at the time. He attributes this to the fact that no standardised written variety was in place then, and dialectal features were not as firmly stigmatised as they were in later times. Furthermore, as was suggested in a fifteenth-century preface to an alphabetical concordance[5] (Kuhn 272;

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[4] I follow Benskin and Laing as well as McIntosh et al. (Section 3.5.2) in their use of the term "dialect" in this instance: the written linguistic repertoire of an individual scribe, i.e. not necessarily representative of how he would have spoken but rather a reflection of where he was trained, where he subsequently worked, and what he worked on.

[5] London British Library MS Royal 17.B.I. It contains a concordance to the Wycliffite New Testament made by an anonymous compiler in the first half of the fifteenth century (Kuhn 258).

see also Wakelin, *Scribal Correction* 163), "Sumtyme Þe same word & Þe self Þat is writen of sum man in oo manere is writen of a-noÞir man in a-noÞir manere" [Sometimes the same word that is written by some man in one way is written by another man in another way].[6] Further on, the author of this preface states the following:

> "If it plese to ony man to write Þis concordaunce, & him ÞenkiÞ Þat summe wordis ben not set in ordre aftir his con- [5b] seit & his manere of writyng, it is not hard, if he take keep wiÞ good avisement in his owne writyng, to sette suche wordis in such an ordre as his owne conseit acordiÞ wel to"
> [If it pleases any man to write this concordance, and he thinks that in his opinion certain words were not set in order and written in his way, it is not hard to consider his own writing and set such words in the order of his conviction].[7] (Kuhn 272)

This implies that in Late Medieval England, altering spellings and grammatical forms was to some extent encouraged, and in any case most likely not considered undesirable.

Given that Late Medieval English did not have a widespread written standard variety and linguistic variation was broadly tolerated, Wakelin (*Scribal Correction* 164) finds it strange that scribes made seemingly needless changes to spelling and grammar. Why did they feel the need to alter a given spelling or structure? It will be argued here that it is precisely the lack of a standardised written variety that leads scribes towards unconsciously changing spellings and grammatical forms according to their own "style-sheets," which reflect how they learned to write English when they were trained. Once trained, scribes could be rather consistent in their individual writings. Moreover, getting the exact wording from the exemplar was often not necessary (see the preface's comments above), so why pay close attention to the spelling when copying a text? This also implies that most scribes would not have been consciously changing the language of texts, which, in a pre-standard written culture, makes sense.

It should be noted at this point that substantial passages of many texts were often left untouched by copying scribes. As with language change, people tend to focus on what has changed rather than on what has been maintained (cf. Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change*), but scribes often copied large parts of a text directly and with few changes

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[6] My translation.

[7] My translation.

(Wakelin, *Scribal Correction* 19-42, 49). Once again, though, in such studies the focus habitually lies on literary texts and poetry, whereas administrative writings, which had different purposes and catered to a different audience, have generally received less attention with regard to copying practices in Medieval England.

3. "A Survey of the Commons" and copying practices in Coventry

The text I will focus on in this essay is called "A Survey of the Commons"[8] (cf. Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book Part I* 45), which was written in Coventry in 1423 (cf. Section 5 for a more detailed description of the text). The only known copy was made almost 100 years later around 1520 in the same place, when many original documents that were in the possession of the local Leet Council were copied into the new court leet book, the Coventry Leet Book.[9] The latter was transcribed and edited by the historian Mary Dormer Harris, who transcribed, edited and published the entire book in four volumes between 1907 and 1913 (EETS OS 134, 135, 138, 146). The manuscript of the Leet Book contains mostly copies of texts pertaining to the council written between 1421 and 1555, and a great part of its content concerns mayoral elections and court sittings, but it also includes copies of letters, accounts, reports, bylaws and other legal documents relating to council matters. Regarding the local copying practices in the Leet Book, Harris states the following:

> As far as we may judge, the copyist followed his original closely, though now and then he chose to summarize rather than transcribe in full, referring the reader to his authority in some such phrase as "as it appeareth in the book of recognizance", or "the book of council;" or in the case of a leet entry, "ut in filaciis plenius apparet" – as it appeareth in the files more at large. (Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book Part IV* xii-xiii)

Unfortunately, as almost all of the original texts have been lost (the Survey of the Commons seems to be one of the few surviving originals), and since Harris was a historian focussing more on the content of the Leet Book rather than on its language, nothing more is said on the subject. With regard to the Survey of the Commons, Harris (*The Coventry Leet Book Part I* 45) only states that "the language of [the original] is, of the two, the more archaic," and she subsequently only marks a few or-

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[8] BA/A/A/3/1 in the Coventry Archives.

[9] BA/E/F/37/1 in the Coventry Archives.

thographic differences between the two versions throughout her transcription (Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book Part I* 45-53).

4. Scribes working in fifteenth-century Coventry

Even though Harris did not elaborate in more detail on the linguistic differences between the two versions of this text in her edition of the Coventry Leet Book (or any other linguistic commentary throughout the book), she did include an overview of the scribes that had worked on the Leet Book (see Table 1 below), which she based on a thorough analysis of the different handwritings in the book (Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book Part IV* 846). She identified seventeen different hands, although this does not exclude the possibility that more than seventeen scribes worked on the volume. Based on this overview, it becomes apparent that scribe A copied the Survey of the Commons into the Leet Book.

Scribe	Description
A	Later copyist of Leet ordinances and chronicle from 1414-44; writes – with one exception – on crescent marked paper (Briquet 8352, Florence 1391-1396); date c. 1520.
B	Later copyist of Leet ordinances from 1426-74, and thenceforward contemporary recorder of both Leet and chronicle entries to 1506; to be identified with John Boteler; date c. 1480-1506.
B types	Chronicle entries 1426-65. Probably in some instances contemporary, but may be as late as c. 1480-1520.
C	Later copyist of Leet ordinances from 1430-1507; date probably contemporary with scribe B, i.e. c.1480-1506.
D	Contemporary copyist of chronicle entries, 1463-71 (a dot over the <y> is characteristic of this scribe). He is described as having an "ill-educated hand".
E	Contemporary copyist of chronicle entries, 1472-74.
F	Inserts a few entries in Boteler's town-clerkship (mayor's election). Probably a contemporary scribe.
G, H, I, J, K, L	Sixteenth century scribes. Entries are contemporary.
Z	Elizabethan scribe. Thomas Banester, town clerk. His thirteenth and fifteenth century entries are not contemporary.
O, P, Q	Elizabethan and Stuart scribes; entries are contemporary.

Table 1: Scribes working on the Coventry Leet Book according to Mary Dormer Harris (*The Coventry Leet Book Part IV* 846)

This overview allows us to take three factors into account that could have had an influence on the linguistic variation and change attested in the Leet Book:

1. the original texts
2. the scribes who copied them
3. time, as we have similar documents from one single place spanning more than a century

As most scribes copied multiple texts into the Leet Book, we can compare not only the language between the different scribes but also the language between the different entries for each scribe. This allows us to see if the scribes themselves were consistent, and if not, how that inconsistency was structured. For example, if scribe A wrote certain words in one particular way in all his copies and other scribes did not, this indicates linguistic variation by the hand of the copying scribe, in this case scribe A. Another possible explanation for such a scenario would be that only Scribe A and none of the other scribes received texts with that one particular variant. This is, however, less likely than a scenario wherein scribe A consistently altered the language of the original texts to a certain extent. This then allows us to infer possible influences of the original texts on his copies, for instance when we see clear outliers: if we have ten texts from scribe A in which certain words are written one way but then also two texts in which he does something completely different, this may be the original text "coming through," thus influencing scribe A's copying language.

Lastly, we can also compare the various entries of the Leet Book over time, as we are dealing with contemporary copies (i.e. copies made around the same time as the originals) from the 1460s onwards (cf. Table 1 above; Harris, *The Coventry Leet Book Part IV* 845-46). In the case of the Survey of the Commons, we can only compare the language that scribe A uses in his copy of this text to his other copies made c. 1520, as well as the language of the copies made by the other scribes working on the Leet Book in the first half of the sixteenth century. The latter will allow us to say something about whether other scribes seemed to be writing in a similar fashion, i.e. indicating local scribal conventions and writing practices, or whether the individual scribes seemed to have been copying in their own different ways, depending on where and when they received their training.

5. The Survey of the Commons: two versions

As mentioned earlier, there are two known versions of the Survey of the Commons from Coventry: BA/A/A/3/1 (dated 1423 by the Coventry Archives) and one that was written in the Coventry Leet Book (BA/E/F/37/1) around 1520. Given the chronology, it would seem that the Leet Book version is a copy of the 1423 version, which would then be the original. This was also the assumption of Mary Dormer Harris (*The Coventry Leet Book Part I* 45), who noted that the 1423 version was probably the original. However, there is no definitive evidence that BA/A/A/3/1 is the original version of this text, other than the fact that we have no other version of it, and it may well be a copy of the original, or even a copy of another copy of the original. Therefore, even though it may very well be the original version of the text used for the 1520 copy, I shall not refer to BA/A/A/3/1 as the original, nor to its scribe/copyist as the author of the text, but instead as the first version and the apparent source text for the copy in the Leet Book (second version).

The two versions are different in a number of ways. First of all, there is almost a century between them, and this becomes apparent in the handwriting. The first version was written in Anglicana Script, whereas the second version was written in Secretary Script, a script that was increasingly used in administrative writings in the course of the fifteenth century in England (cf. Parkes; Roberts). Both scripts are cursive scripts and could therefore have been subject to internal dictation by the copying scribes as they could be read and copied relatively fast. They do not necessarily reflect a full *cursiva currens*, however, but rather a *cursiva media,* especially the first version in Anglicana, as some of the letters are not connected in a cursive manner, meaning that it most likely took more time and effort to write down.[10] The second version, on the other hand, despite not necessarily being a full *cursiva currens* either, already allowed for much faster writing, and internal dictation may have played a larger role here.

Secondly, the first version was written down on a single large sheet of parchment whereas the second version was written down in the Leet Book (13a-16a), which had more (but much smaller) paper pages. The first version received slightly more graphic attention in the form of small blue paragraph markers, which is most likely due to the amount of available space. Whereas more pages could have been added to the Leet

[10] I would to like to thank Alpo Honkapohja for drawing my attention to this.

Book, the first version only had one sheet of parchment, which compelled the scribe to use as much of its space as possible. This resulted in the use of coloured paragraph markings as it would have taken much more space to start a new paragraph on the left hand side of the parchment every time. In the Leet Book, however, the scribe could start a new paragraph after each section without worrying about running out of space. It has also been noted that this dense way of writing documentary texts could be due to preventing others from intruding words and thus causing legal problems (Wakelin, *Scribal Correction* 285), although this does not seem to have been the case for the second version.

A third significant difference between the two versions, and the focus of this essay, concerns the language. I will now turn to my methodology and analysis of this aspect (Sections 5.1 and 5.2), before interpreting and discussing the results (Section 6).

5.1 Methodology

As with all data obtained for the Emerging Standards Project, both texts were transcribed in XML (Extensible Markup Language) using Oxygen XML Editor 18 and the HisTEI framework, which allowed me to transcribe texts in TEI in a word-processor-like view.[11] I subsequently carried out my analysis through a close reading of both versions of the text as well as a more quantitative approach by using AntConc version 3.4.4 (Anthony), which enabled me to search for specific words (or combinations thereof) and carry out key-word analyses for which I applied log-likelihood tests. With a key-word analysis (usually carried out using either a Chi-squared or log-likelihood test; cf. Baker 24, 35-36, 38, 62), one can calculate the chances of a particular word occurring more often in one text compared to another than we might expect to happen by chance alone. For example, we might find out that the word *the* is "key" for text A compared to text B (which mostly has the variant form *ye*), which means that the probability for *the* to occur in text A and not B by mere chance is extremely small. Therefore, a particular variable must be structurally influencing the distribution of these realisations of *the* across the two different texts, and one can subsequently start looking for that variable (e.g. where the two scribes were trained).

[11] github.com/odaata/HisTEI/wiki

5.2 Data analysis

5.2.1 Syntax and lexis

First of all, it quickly becomes clear that not much has been changed between the two versions in terms of the syntax. The order of words has been left unchanged for the most part. However, a noteworthy change appears in the description of the city, in which the order of two highways is switched around, i.e. "from highway X until highway Y" becomes "from highway Y until highway X" (see passage 1 below). In general, however, an analysis of three randomly chosen paragraphs from the text confirms that the syntax has not been changed much between the two versions.

When considering the lexis of the texts, it becomes clear that a little more has changed. As is apparent in all three passages below, words have on occasion been added by scribe A (e.g. *of the moneth* in passage 1), or left out (e.g. *her after* in the same passage). In another instance, the scribe omitted and added words at the same time. In passage 1 he changed *the firſt herri peyto meir of the Cite of Couentre with his Counſell* into *the ſaid maiour and his councell*, and in passage 2 he added *John wellford and his felows aboue namyd at ye day to them lymyted Comyn and* to the text after *the wiche*. Altogether, the first version, which consists of 2,792 words, has been changed to consist of 2,753 words, which equals an overall decrease of 1.4 percent in lexis.

Passages from BA/A/A/3/1 version:

Passage 1

FForasmyche as dyſſencions Stirynge3 and mocions haue ben hadde afore this tyme for certen comen the wiche hathe not ben conuerſantly knowen as for comen In eſchueng of perels that her after myght falle The xvj day of feuerer the 3ere Reynyng of kyng herri the sixt after the conqueſt the firſt herri peyto meir of the Cite of Couentre with his Counſell thus hath ordeined and prouided That ther shuld of four partie3 of the seid Cite of Couentre that is to sey of the Eſt Weſt North and South a certen of awnſient and wiſe men be Charged to enquere of the comen of the seid Cite And whatfelde3 owen of old tyme and of comyn right to be comen And than to bryng hit in to the seid meir in writyng to that end that herafter hit myght be Regeſtered and so the Comyn opunly knowen Whervppon the that wern charged to enquere for the Eſt part of the seid Cite that is to sey fro the hye wey that ledith fro Couentre vnto atown that is called Bynley Vnto to a hye wey that is called Sewalpawment the whiche ledith fro Couentre to Ward leyceſter and to bryng hit in in Writyng vnto the seyd meir amonday next afore the feſt of seynt Gregori

Passages from Leet Book version:

fforaſmoche as dyſſencions ſtirrynges and mocions haue byn had a fore tyme and not long a gone for certen comon the wich hath not byn conuerſantly knowen as for comyn In eſcewyng of perell yat myght fall the xviten day of the moneth of february the yer of the reign of kyng henry the sixte aftur the conqueſt the firſt The ſaid maiour and his councell thus haue ordenyd and prouydyd that yer ſchall of four parties of the Cite of Couentre yat is to ſay of ye Eſt / Weſt / North and ſouthe a certen of aunceant and wiſemen be chargid for to enquere of the Comyn of the ſaid Cite and what felldys owyn as of old tyme and of comyn ryght to be comyn and than to bryng hit Inneto ye ſaid maiour in wrytyng to yat end yat heraftur hit myght be regeſted and so the comyn openly knowen wheruppon tho yat wer Chargid to enquer for the Eſt parte of the ſaid Cyte yat is to ſay from the hye way that is callyd Sewall pauement ye wich ledyth from Couentre to leyceſtre vnto a noyer hie waye yat ledyth from Couentre vnto a town yat is callyd Bynley on the other ſyde and to bryng I hit in in wrytyng vnto ye ſaid maiour on monday next a for the feſt of ſaynt Gregory

Passage 2

The Wiche seyn that ther is afeld that is called Byſſhoppeſhey and hit lithe in brede fro Walfurlong vnto a hye wey in haſilwode ledyng fro Couentre vnto leiceſter And in lengeth fro Coteſwaſt vnto A hye Wey in haſilwode ledyng fro Couentre to Nuneton And that same Byſſhoppeſhey they seyne is comen at lammas euery ȝer and fro lammas to the feſt of the purificacion of our lady

The wiche John wellford and his felows aboue namyd at ye day to them lymyted Comyn and ſeyn yat yer is a feld wich is callyd Byſchops hay and hit lyeth in brede fro wallforlong on that one partie vnto a hie way in haſillwood ledyng from Couentre to leyceſtre and in length from Cotes waſt vnto a hie way in haſillwood ledyng from Couentre to ward Nuneaton and yat feld yat is to ſay Byſchoppeſhay thay seyn is comyn at the feſt of lammas

Passage 3

Alſo they seyn that Beelorchard and hulmylmedow with all the feldeȝ and croſteȝ lyeng be twene Radfordweyand Crampyſeld in brede and in lengeth fro ij Croſteȝ howſeȝ and gardenȝ longyng to seynt mari Ante in the Trinite Chirche the whiche ij Croſteȝ howſeȝ and gardenȝ arn seuerall Vnto Alane ledyng fro batemAnneſacre Arn comen At lammas vnto the purificacion except Ahowſe witha garden sumtyme of John Aſkmakerȝ of killyngworth and Abern with agarden of John Walgraue and A croft with a duſhowſe of te tenoures of the prioures of Couentre

Allſo ye ſay þat Bellorchard and hullmyllmedow with all the feldys and Croftys lyeng bytwen Radford weyand crampyſeld in Brede and in lenght from ij Croſteȝ and þe houſeȝ and gardyns longyng to ſaynt mary awtur in the trinite church þe wich ij Croſteȝ houſeȝ and Gardyns ar seuerall vnto a lane ledyng from Batemannyſacre ar comyn at lammas vnto þe purificacion of our lady except a houſe with gardyne sumtyme off John aſkemare of kenelworthe and a barn with a Gardyn of John walgraueand a Crofte with a duſhous of the tenure of þe prior and Couent of Couentre ye wich ar seuerall

5.2.2 Orthography and morphology

An investigation of the spelling and morphology of the two versions reveals that more has been altered: many words are spelled either slightly differently (e.g. *ben* vs. *byn*, *had* vs. *hadde*, *wich* vs. *wiche*, *hath* vs. *hathe*, *ȝere* vs. *ȝere*, *after* vs. *aftur*, etc., see also the passages above) or considerably differently (e.g. *eſchueng* vs. *eſcewyng*, *awnſient* vs. *aunceant*, etc.). With regard to morphology, there is some variation regarding the third person plural indicative present and past inflections: *wern* vs. *wer*, *arn* vs. *ar*, etc., so either an *-n* or zero ending. The following section will examine if this variation in spelling and morphology is to some extent structured, and if so, how.

5.2.2.1 Orthography: use of thorn, yogh, and other significant forms

Regarding the orthographic variation, I decided to look at two very distinct orthographic features that seem to reflect a key difference between the texts: the use of thorn, <þ> / <y>, and yogh, <ȝ>. Based on a key-word analysis it becomes clear that thorn (in this case y-like thorn, cf. Benskin) is indeed a significantly characteristic feature of the second version compared to the first one. *Yat*, *ye*, *yei*, *yer*, etc. all occur in the Leet Book, whereas the first version clearly prefers <th> in these instances: *that*, *the*, *thei*, *ther*, etc. After a more thorough analysis of the data, the following image emerges (Table 2):

	BA/A/A/3/1	Leet Book
<th>	393	164
<y>	0	174
<þ>	5	31

Table 2: Use of <th>, y-like thorn, and <þ> in the two versions of the Survey of the Commons.

The numbers are based on an analysis of a selection of words that came up in the key-word list as well as those containing a <þ> at some point, which are *that*, *the*, *they*, *there*, *their*, *other* and *these*. The reason I based this analysis on a selection of words rather than the entire text is because whereas <th> was used on many different occasions, both y-like thorn and <þ> were mostly used word-initially and occasionally word-medially (e.g. *oþer*). As I intended to determine the variation between these variants, I needed to be sure that all three variants were viable

options for the scribes to use in the words I included in the analysis. This is also the reason why I only selected words in which <þ> was used at least once in both versions of the text.

As regards the use of yogh <ȝ>, it was used to indicate either the voiced or unvoiced alveolar sibilants /s/ and /z/ (e.g. *gardenȝ*) given its visual similarity to <z>, and sometimes the voiced palatal approximant /j/ (e.g. *ȝere* "year") or the voiced velar stop /g/ (e.g. *ȝeld* "guild") (cf. Lass 35-37). It occurs 78 times in the first version and 32 times in the second version. This indicates that scribe A seems to have preferred yogh <ȝ> less in favour of <s> or <z> (e.g. *gardenȝ* vs. *gardyns*), <y> (e.g. *ȝere* vs. *yere*), or <g> (e.g. *ȝeld* vs. *guylde*) compared to the scribe of the first version. In this case I was able to look at the raw frequencies and consider the entire text rather than a selection of words – as was the case with the analysis of thorn – given the binary nature of this feature.

Lastly, based on another key-word analysis, it also becomes apparent that certain other spelling differences allow us to distinguish between the two versions. This seems to indicate that the scribes were relatively consistent in their writing (at least with regard to these words), and that there was little overlap in the use of these different forms (Table 3).

BA/A/A/3/1	Leet Book
comen	*comyn*
called	*callyd*
alſo	*allſo*
wey	*way*
seid	*ſaid*
fro	*from*
whiche	*wich*

Table 3: Key characteristic orthographic differences between the two versions.

5.2.2.2 Morphology: *-n* and zero endings for the third person plural indicative

With regard to morphology, the only key difference between the two versions concerns the third person plural indicative present and past *-n* and zero endings. The attested forms that I include in this analysis can all be assigned to a specific third person plural subject in the text and also show variation with regard to *-n* vs. zero endings: *say*, *are*, *were*, *ought*,

and *lie* (e.g. *sey* vs. *seyn*, *ar* vs. *arn*, *owth* vs. *ow(e)n*). The distribution of the two variants across the two texts is as follows:

	BA/A/A/3/1	Leet Book
-n	87	37
Zero	5	44

Table 4: Distribution of <-n> and zero endings for the third person plural indicative present and past endings.

These results seem to indicate that scribe A changed the morphology of the first version to a certain extent, going from a vast majority of *-n* forms to an approximate 50-50 ratio between *-n* forms and zero forms.

6. Interpretation and discussion of results

6.1 Lexis and syntax: manuscript context

The attested differences between the two versions with regard to the lexis can be explained through the context in which the copy was created, i.e. the rest of the Coventry Leet Book. For example, in passage 1 in the Leet Book (see Section 5.2.1 above), the mayor Herri Peyto has been mentioned one paragraph earlier in another text just before the survey starts. Scribe A could therefore shorten this part of the text by using the referent *the ſaid* instead of repeating earlier mentioned information. In passage 2 scribe A added *John wellford and his felows aboue namyd at ye day to them lymyted Comyn and* to the text after *the wiche*. The context here is that all of the names had been written out in the previous sentence, but as scribe A had much more space to write, he was able to give the names as a list in a separate paragraph, whereas the first version had to include all of the names in the running text. Because scribe A thus started a new paragraph with passage 2, and not only a new sentence, he must have felt the need to repeat himself to a certain extent here.

As regards the syntax of the text, only a few changes were made, and the ones that have been observed can be explained through the copyist's personal preferences, but even this might not be the case. If he was copying from internal dictation he would have remembered the information and then may have copied it in a different order through mere chance. This was perhaps more likely to occur as the order of such sentences did not change the meaning or content, but only the order in which they were presented.

6.2 Orthography and morphology: Scribes influencing texts, or texts influencing scribes?

When considering the changes made in the orthography and morphology of the text, the question emerges as to whether these changes were due to changing spelling conventions in Coventry at the beginning of the sixteenth century, or due to the individual scribe, in this case scribe A. Moreover, what do the forms tell us about possible influences from the original text on the copying language of this scribe?

First of all, as regards the use of yogh <ȝ>, scribe A uses this graph 32 times in his copy of the Survey of the Commons, and 18 times in his other copies. Other scribes active in Coventry and working on the Leet Book in the first half of the sixteenth century do not use this graph at all. The normalised frequencies are shown below in Table 5.

	Survey of the Commons (1423)	Survey of the Commons (scribe A) (c. 1520)	Other copies by scribe A (c. 1520)	Other copies by different scribes (1500-50)
Total frequency of <ȝ>	78	32	18	0
Normalised frequency per 10,000 characters	19.4	8.5	2.4	0

Table 5: Use of yogh <ȝ> in Coventry, 1423-1550.

Based on this, it seems that it was most likely scribal spelling conventions that had an effect on the changes between the first and the second versions of the text, as we see a decrease in use of <ȝ> in Coventry in the course of the first half of the sixteenth century. The fact that scribe A is still using it significantly more often than his contemporaries might be explained through an influence of the first version on his language. Moreover, most of the copies scribe A was making were based on fifteenth-century material, and not – as was probably the case with most of his contemporaries – from the sixteenth century. Thus, it seems that

scribe A's language was influenced to some extent by the texts he was copying. Unfortunately, we do not have any copies by him that could be considered contemporary, i.e. copies of texts that were written down in the first half of the sixteenth century, in order to determine whether his frequent use of <ȝ> was a personal preference, or whether it was due to the fifteenth-century texts he was copying.

Secondly, let us consider the use of thorn. For this analysis to work, I could only include the previously mentioned selection of words (*that*, *the*, *they*, *there*, *their*, *other* and *these*), as I know that all three possible variants (i.e. <th>, y-like thorn and <þ>) were used at least once for these words in the Survey of the Commons. The results are as follows:

	Survey of the Commons (1423)	Survey of the Commons (scribe A) (c. 1520)	Other copies by scribe A (c. 1520)	Other copies by different scribes (1500-50)
Total frequency of <þ>	5 [1.3%]	31 [8.4%]	0 [0%]	40 [6%]
Total frequency of y-like thorn	0 [0%]	174 [47.2%]	136 [23.8%]	2 [0.3%]
Total frequency of <th>	393 [98.7%]	164 [44.4%]	436 [76.2%]	624 [93.7%]

Table 6: Use of <th>, y-like thorn and <þ> in Coventry, 1423-1550.

This overview confirms that scribe A used y-like thorn much more than both his contemporaries and the fifteenth-century material he was copying. When considering all of his copies it becomes clear that he was still using <th> forms in most instances, but that his second choice clearly was the y-like thorn and not <þ>. However, he used <þ> much more in his copy of the Survey of the Commons. This can then not be explained by the use of <þ> in the first version, as that variant was used only in 1.3 percent of all instances. What is certain, however, is that scribe A changed some of the spellings of the first version of the text through his personal preference and not through any conventions or writing practices in his direct professional environment.

Finally, let us consider the key-word analysis between the first and second versions of the Survey of the Commons, which shows that the following different forms are distributed asymmetrically across the two versions: *comen* ~ *comyn*, *called* ~ *callyd*, *alſo* ~ *allſo*, *wey* ~ *way*, *seid* ~ *said*, *fro*

~ *from, whiche* ~ *wich* (cf. Table 3). This indicates that the two scribes wrote relatively consistently with regard to spelling for at least part of their writings, which strengthens the notion that each scribe wrote on the basis of how he would have learned to write. There is of course still much orthographic variation within each of the two versions of the text (after all, scribe A did sometimes use <ȝ>, and the scribe of the first version also sometimes wrote *wich*), but for many words there was a clear preference in terms of how they were spelled. For example, scribe A never wrote *called* (only *callyd*), and only wrote *seid* instead of *said* once. Such seemingly small features indicate that scribes could have had clear orthographical preferences as well as be very consistent in using them. This is most likely linked to where a scribe was trained, as well as where he subsequently worked, which could then be tentatively linked to where a scribe was from, i.e. his geographical origins. In the case of scribe A, for example, it seems that, when comparing his texts to those of other scribes working in Coventry, he may have come from a place further north (in particular when scrutinising his use of y-like thorn).

If we now consider these seemingly structural differences in spelling between the two versions in light of both other copies written down by scribe A and what other scribes were doing in the second half of the sixteenth century in Coventry, we get the following results:

	Survey of the Commons (1423)	Survey of the Commons (scribe A) (c. 1520)	Other copies by scribe A (c. 1520)	Other copies by different scribes (1500-50)
comen [comyn]	43 [2]	1 [45]	1 [3]	20 [0]
called [callyd]	30 [0]	0 [28]	0 [1]	0 [0]
alſo [allſo]	39 [0]	3 [31]	2 [64]	23 [18]
wey [way]	29 [0]	2 [32]	0 [10]	3 [0]
seid [ſaid]	20 [0]	1 [24]	1 [44]	30 [2]
fro [from]	61 [1]	22 [24]	3 [3]	0 [14]
Which(e) [wich(e)]	28 [16]	0 [42]	6 [0]	3 [0]

Table 7: Significantly characteristic forms used in Coventry, 1423-1550.

The results suggest that scribe A's spelling conventions were for the most part different from those of his contemporary colleagues. The only time scribe A adheres to the conventions of his contemporaries is with the spelling of which [which(e) / wich(e)], and then he only does so for his other copies and not in the copy of the survey of the commons. Thus, scribe A seems to have applied a personal "style-sheet" to the

majority of his copies compared to his contemporaries. It is therefore most likely he who was personally responsible for the changes of some of the spellings from the first version of the survey of the commons, and not any possible spelling conventions that were adhered to by the scribes in Coventry at that time.

Turning now to morphology, what does the comparison reveal with regard to the third person plural indicative present and past? Earlier on I considered the following verbs: *say*, *are*, *ought*, *were*, and *lie*.

	Survey of the Commons (1423)	Survey of the Commons (scribe A) (c. 1520)	Other copies by scribe A (c. 1520)	Other copies by different scribes (1500-50)
say [-n]	1 [43]	14 [20]	0 [0]	0 [0]
are [-n]	0 [24]	21 [3]	0 [0]	1 [0]
ought [-n]	4 [6]	4 [6]	0 [0]	0 [0]
were [-n]	0 [5]	3 [2]	5 [1]	2 [0]
lie [-n]	0 [7]	1 [6]	0 [0]	0 [0]

Table 8: Use of the zero form and *-n* ending for the third person plural indicative present and past in Coventry, 1423-1550.

Unfortunately, most of the third person plural present and past indicatives attested in the Survey of the Commons are almost completely absent from the rest of the available data, keeping me from inferring anything from this comparison other than that scribe A changed a significant amount of the original morphology (moreover, in the Leet Book many verbs are conjugated to the third person singular instead of the plural as references are often made to "every man" or "no inhabitaunt" to represent the people of the city). A quick search through the other copies made by scribe A as well as the ones by the other scribes in the Leet Book from the first half of the sixteenth century, reveals that the *-n* ending was rarely used (except for a few instances of *leden*, *ben*, and *orden* [as opposed to *be*, *come*, *exceed*, *leve*, *think*, *sell*, *admit*, etc.]), but even then, no discernible pattern becomes apparent, only that it seems that the *-n* ending was declining in combination with a third person plural subject. It may therefore very well be a general diachronic development.

Based on what scribe A did with the majority of the *-n* ending forms, however, it becomes apparent that, once again, he altered the language of the original to some extent but was also influenced by the original to a certain degree as he seems to have used more *-n* endings than he did in his other copies. More data are, however, needed to confirm this tendency.

7. Conclusions

Based on the findings from this case study, it seems that in local administrative documents the variation between the exemplar and the copy primarily occurred on the lexical, orthographical and morphological levels of the text. As the contents of the text were meant to be clear and as unambiguous as possible, the fact that the syntax was much less affected is not unexpected. After all, it was imperative that all of the names of the people and crofts and fields were included (although the exact order could vary), and that the language did not allow for a different interpretation than the one intended. Because of this, it was most likely also highly important for scribes to copy the text accurately in order to preserve its legally specific contents (cf. Rissanen 120-21). As stated by Wakelin (*Scribal Correction* 89), who briefly touches upon this topic, "accuracy mattered." Even today, one can observe extremely consistent language use in legal and administrative registers as it tries to exclude as much vagueness and ambiguity as possible to avoid potential misinterpretations and disputes about the contents. Concerning this text type in the Late Medieval period, however, it seems that only syntax was retained rather faithfully when copying texts, as different degrees of variation can be found on other linguistic levels. This should be kept in mind when considering such texts for linguistic analyses.

Regarding the attested variation, even though the differences might seem fairly random at first, many features are consistently used (or not) by the different scribes. This is most likely a direct result of their individual training (cf. Wakelin *Scribal Correction* 102), rather than a superimposed standard variety or the professional environment in which they were working. This highlights the importance of the individual scribe's education in a pre-standard culture when discussing the language attested in Late Medieval English administrative writings, in particular with regard to orthography. Regarding the attested lexical variation, here it has become clear that manuscript context should also be taken into consideration when scrutinising language variation between copies. As a more external influence besides the copying scribe, this aspect can of course only be considered if one studies the actual manuscript. For many linguistic studies this is unfortunately often difficult (if not impossible) to do, but it should always be at least considered with regard to attested lexical variation in Late Middle English texts.

It has furthermore become apparent that many forms attested in the second version were most likely present in this version because of their presence in the first version. Thus, the original text seems to have influ-

enced the copying language of scribe A to some extent. This notion of possible exemplars' influences on scribes' language use must not be discarded nor ignored too quickly, since the majority of medieval scribes' work consisted of copying other documents, and their "copying language" is often their most recorded use of language. It is of course impossible to determine to what extent this language reflected their speech, but as we are only dealing with written language when scrutinising language variation and change in the past, understanding what could have influenced that language becomes highly essential.

On a final note, as regards whose language it is that we are looking at when considering Middle English texts such as the Survey of the Commons as copied by scribe A, it is important to remember that since this version was produced by scribe A, it has also become part of his linguistic repertoire. This does not mean, of course, that he would have written in a similar fashion when he was not copying texts, but we must also be cautious when trying to determine which parts of a text represent a particular scribe and which parts reflect the language of the exemplar, as both become part of an individual scribe's linguistic repertoire in the end. This notion consequently emphasises the importance of the language of non-contemporary texts in a later period, especially in a prestandard written culture in which variation was well accepted, as it could influence the language of newer generations of scribes to various degrees. Language variation and change in the past may thus not only have been about the influences of individual authors and scribes next to the existing ideologies and ideas spanning a greater social and geographical area, but also of other (non-contemporary) texts.

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