

Documenting “Earlier” American English

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“The great art of the historical linguist is to make the best of this bad data – ‘bad’ in that it may be fragmentary, corrupted, or many times removed from the actual productions of native speakers” Labov 1972:100). What is called for is what Labov terms “methodological self-criticism [that] leads to a continual refinement of our methods” (1972:99).

- 1) The more documents we can amass and organize, the better.
- 2) The more meta-data on the authors of documents, the better.
- 3) The earlier the documents, the better.

Summing up, historical sociolinguistic research rests upon critical mass, on social and personal information on authors and authorship, and on historical depth. Optimally documents are numerous, informative, and old, and collectively these assumptions point us toward what I will call DOIs, i.e. = document of interest. However, they hardly help us find them, so researchers need ways to minimize our work. Two principles are crucial in pursuing DOIs.

Since DOIs should be close to speech, what does “speech-like” mean? Culpeper and Kytö. 2010, for example, take it as axiomatic that we should study dialogues, both those that are narrational (such as trial proceedings) and non-narrational (such as from plays). I argue that we should privilege not texts having the most features of interaction, but rather ones showing the least command of writing conventions (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling), ones exhibiting the lack of literacy, that unambiguously have the absence of normative features.

Since DOIs are from writers of non-elite echelons of society, identifying the social station of writers may be more important than most other personal information, such as their names or locale. From the researcher’s point of view, why a non-elite individual would write at all is the more important issue, because having an idea about this enables us to target DOIs in the first place. Therefore, we should target DOIs on the basis of the motivation to write. I propose that non-elite writers fall into one of three categories:

- lonely-hearts seeking to overcome separation from others (e.g. emigrant letters, Civil War letters)
- desperadoes seeking relief from privation, poverty, or oppression (e.g. African American letters in the Civil War, from Sierra Leone)
- functionaries seeking to fulfill an obligation of employment (e.g. plantation overseers, Indian traders)

Ascertaining nonliterate quality and social motivation are pragmatic issues, primarily because the time researchers have seeking DOIs in manuscript archives is normally quite finite. Library catalogues and finding aids tell us nothing about the literate quality of documents, whereas a researcher’s quick visual inspection usually suffices to discover the presence or absence of punctuation and thus whether making a copy of a document is justified.

Library catalogues and finding aids infrequently provide information about writers to determine their non-elite status, if they identify such writers at all. To deal with time pressures, limitations of library records, the fact that DOIs are often buried within much larger collections, and other constraints, it is crucial to consult archival staff and social historians, who often retain a visual memory of documents for many years. In many cases my own research has depended heavily on them.

Case Study of Verb-Phrase *have* Ellipsis.

Evidence from Irish emigrants (Montgomery 1997)

- 1) we Shoul^d not Ø Lost one Town of them (Galphin, 15 October 1775)
- 2) my Journey there wou'd Ø been but of little service (Croghan, 12 May 1765)

Is this tendency an isolated one geographically or structurally?

Evidence from *Corpus of American Civil War Letters* [10000+ letters & diaries, 5 000 000+ words] (Montgomery 2014, Montgomery, Ellis and Cooper 2014)

- 3) I *had* liked to *have* Shot a fisherman while Standing at the mouth of mitchael Sound. [John B. Lance, 10 November 1861, N.C.)
- 4) I waunt you to write your letters a litel plainer for I *had not a like to a* maid out half of your words. (T. Warrick, 30 April 1862, Ala.)
- 5) David goins is well I *had like to* forgot him. (W. H. Chapman, 10 May 1864, Tenn.)
- 6) I will tell you we had a time of it in the cold we *like to a* froze. (A. J. Spease, 6 Dec. 1863, N.C.)
- 7) I have bin quite sick ever sence last week but I *like to* Ø died thursday night I was out of my mind nearly al night long and I had seven or eight fits. [J. W. Muire, August 1862, Va.)
- 8) i *liked to* for got to tell yoe Sarah C has gown to new barn (J. Hall, 13 April 1862, N.C.)

Reduction of *have to a* in CACWL:

- 9) She wood *a* ben Struck to *a* done Som good (G. Robertson [NC], 3 May 1863)

Ellipsis of *have* in CACWL after a modal = 34 (South = 10, Midwest = 8, Penn. = 3, Northeast = 11)

- 10) I would Ø answered your kind letter before now if I had of been able I have not been well since I was at Sis Loulies. (S. Buntin, 3 February 1861, Miss.)
- 11) you said that you I *would* Ø *rote* befor if you thought i would answer it. (J. Linfor, 6 November, 1861, Ill.)
- 12) it appears you didnot get it as you *would* Ø *said* something about it. (B. Hagenbuch, 19 February 1865, Penn.)
- 13) If the thing had ben attempted we proberly should have taken it but we *should* Ø *lost* half our men and the place gained *would* Ø *ben* of no imprtance to us. (M. Larry, 8 December 1863, Maine)

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