

Third-person verb inflection in Shakespeare's dramatic texts

This paper investigates the frequencies of the Early Modern English (EModE) verbal suffixes *-(e)th* and *-(e)s* in a corpus of dramatic texts by William Shakespeare. The two forms are allomorphs of the {3rd p. sg.} morpheme, as shown in (1) and (2):

- (1) *Whence comethth this alarum, and the noise?* [1 Henry VI, 1.6]
- (2) *My dearest love, Duncan comes^s here tonight* [Macbeth, 1.5]

In EModE, the northern suffix *-(e)s* gradually replaced southern *-(e)th* (Barber 1997; Nevalainen 2006). It is likely that the process was partly governed by stylistic factors, with a higher proportion of southern forms retained in formal registers for longer (cf. Görlach 1991; Barber 1997; Cowie 2012). With regard to Shakespeare, Barber (1997) states that *-(e)th* is rarely used in 'comic or low-life prose scenes', and Taylor (1972) finds that later plays favour the incoming variant more strongly. Further, the traditional variant correlates with the verbs *do* and *have* (perhaps also *say*) and with stem-final sibilants (as in *surpasseth* or *reacheth*), in which case the affix *-(e)th* functions much like the present-day allomorph [-ɪz].

Using the *Shakespeare First Folio Corpus* hosted by UCREL at Lancaster University, the study takes a multifactorial approach to the alternation of 3rd-person-singular inflectional suffixes in 36 plays by William Shakespeare. A total number of $n = 10,322$ valid tokens is inspected, clustering in $n = 986$ different lemmas. Datapoints were manually coded for PLAY (i.e. name of the play), LEMMA, CATEGORY (comedy, tragedy, history) TIME (i.e. time when the play was finished), FREQUENCY (lemma frequency in a large EModE reference corpus), SIBILANT (i.e. stem-final sibilance) and PATTERN (the syllable structure and stress pattern of the stem), as well as the dependent variable, AFFIX. Variation was then analysed with a mixed-effects binary logistic regression model (with random intercepts for PLAY and LEMMA) using Bayesian estimation as implemented in the R-package *brms* (Bürkner 2021).

As expected, the overall percentage of conservative southern allomorphs is very low. Histories and (to a lesser extent) tragedies are characterised by somewhat higher percentages of *-(e)th*, which suggests that those categories roughly correspond to a more elevated, formal style. There is a surprisingly substantial effect of TIME, with later plays leaning more strongly towards the incoming variant. The FREQUENCY of verb types (or lemmas), on the other hand, hardly plays a role – an effect that was expected based on the exceptional behaviour of high-frequency verbs like *have* and *do*. Finally, a stem-final sibilant makes the selection of the traditional ending considerably more likely.

This paper thus confirms and elaborates several findings concerning a central morphophonemic variable of EModE grammar, based on a unified quantitative analysis. While most results seem plausible, a (self-)critical stance will be taken towards aspects that are at present difficult to measure and quantify. This concerns a more fine-grained analysis of the social dynamics of Shakespeare's plays beyond the rough approximation provided by the three genre categories (comedies, tragedies and histories), as well as the potentially important difference between verse and prose passages (cf. Lass 1999).

References

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