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Spelling in context: A transhistorical pragmatic perspective on orthographic practices in English

Caroline Tagg, The Open University

Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, caroline.tagg@open.ac.uk

Mel Evans, University of Leicester

Leicester, LE1 7RH, mel.evans@leicester.ac.uk

1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on new media spelling variation (or ‘respelling’) not only to identify what is ‘new’ about digital orthographic practices, but also as a way of reflecting more widely on a transhistorical analysis of language- and literacy-related practices in English. It considers the implications of a *transhistorical pragmatic* approach for our understanding of processes of technologically mediated language change, identity construction, and the dynamics of social interaction. Drawing on the uniformitarian principle (Bergs 2012; Labov 1972), we argue for the value of a comparative approach which seeks to identify and account for both change and continuity between time periods, whilst also recognising the historically and culturally situated nature of contemporary practices and their apparent historical antecedents.

To illustrate how transhistorical pragmatics might enable a more critical and informed assessment of English language practices, we undertake a comparative analysis of spelling in two datasets: twenty-first century text messages and sixteenth-century correspondence. Unlike other studies of new media spelling, we focus not on identifying re-spelt forms but on writers’ orthographic consistency, thus enabling comparisons with spelling in a pre-standardised era (Evans 2012, 2013). Our focus is on the wider ideological contexts in which these materials were produced; particularly the impact of orthographic standardisation and the (potential) social meanings that may result. Differences in cultural context entail differences in social meaning: spelling meant different things to our writers, because of the

contrasting language ideologies in the two periods. However, the comparison of the two datasets also reveals commonalities that may not be expected, given the four-century-long temporal gap. The twenty-first century digital media and early modern letter writers show similarities in some aspects of spelling practice, such as their consistency in practice, and in the development of personal idiosyncracies, even if the formal properties are more distinct. More abstractly, the analysis highlights the continuities over time in the relationship between technology, ideology, and linguistic and social practices, even if the micro-level linguistic forms and their contextual functions diverge across the datasets from the two periods.

2. Introducing transhistorical pragmatics

2.1 A comparative approach

Understanding what is new about early twenty-first century spelling practices in digital media – as with any communicative practice – involves an appreciation of what is *not* new; that is, of establishing continuities in practice and enduring elements of human communication which transcend historical boundaries. Our argument is that this understanding can be reached through a transhistorical pragmatic approach which views language practices not only as lived experiences grounded in historical contexts but also as potentially atemporal human endeavours to communicate. Our proposed approach seeks to identify continuities in phenomena across historical periods to the present day, and to explain perceived and real differences. At its heart, then, are the principles of comparison and of continuity: the need to look beyond the immediate social context to other times and spaces in order to appreciate the wider trajectories and cycles from which contemporary practices emerge.

The principal way in which we approach communicative practices transhistorically is through a *comparative or contrastive approach* which explores the realisations of a practice – or how it has been conceptualised by researchers – across multiple points in time. This approach can be carried out *directly*, as demonstrated in Seargeant’s study (this volume), through comparative analysis of practices involved across synchronic snapshots (see also Kessler & Bergs 2003; Lötscher 1981). Transhistorical research can also be conducted *indirectly*, though the application to one time period of a concept developed to describe practices in another, as in Kadar’s (this volume) use of the concept of ritual abuse, developed to explain medieval data, for understanding online aggression. In this chapter, we adopt

elements of both approaches, comparing individuals' spelling practices across two points in time using the concept of consistency, developed for the analysis of pre-standardisation spelling in English (Evans 2012, 2013).

A diachronic comparative method of interrogation relies on the uniformitarian principle (Bergs 2012: 84) for its validity. The principle states that throughout history 'the forces operating to produce linguistic changes today are of the same kind and order' (Labov 1972: 275), entailing that all possible or impossible linguistic configurations have (most likely) always had that status, with configurations presumed to remain constant over time (Bergs 2012: 85). The uniformitarian principle is a necessary conceptual step for the examination of the past, underpinning interpretations and theorisations of (linguistic) practices made at a temporal remove. Without it, our incomplete knowledge of the past would subsume the evidence we do have, prohibiting extrapolations and generalisations of the (socio)linguistic system. Traugott (2017: 290) advocates treating "historical records as a benchmark", whilst recognising their incompleteness. Transhistorical pragmatics draws on the uniformitarian principle to interpret the incomplete evidence we have of language and communication from historical periods.

Bergs (2012) cautions against an uncritical interpretation of (historical) linguistic evidence without sufficient contextualisation. Whilst linguistic processes may have remained the same, the social meanings and contexts of use of a particular linguistic form or feature may not (cf Traugott 2017: 290-1). In the case of digital media, whilst similarities between modern and historical interaction show persuasively that digital phenomena have historical antecedents and should not be conceived of solely as different and unique, we cannot also assume that what looks the same to us was necessarily experienced or interpreted in the same way by people living in historically and culturally distinct social contexts. To be effective, therefore, analysis of digital phenomena needs to recognise and account for the historically and culturally situated nature of contemporary affordances, practices and ideologies, and attend to how this environment of use may vary across time and space. *Contextual breadth* - meaning the contextual factors that shape how a linguistic feature or practice is used and its social significance - is a critical component of transhistorical pragmatics, as it helps to ensure that, when engaging with *historical depth*, interpretations do not become anachronistic.

2.2 Context in transhistorical pragmatics

The contextualisation of linguistic data is a central tenet in pragmatics, as well as other linguistic sub-disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, which seek to understand ‘language in use’. Moving on from the early treatment of language as an abstract construct, linguists now recognise the role of context and its complexity as discursively co-constructed through interaction. As one example of this principle, in his ethnographic research Gumperz (1982) observed how “contextualisation cues” – meaning “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions” (Gumperz 1982: 131) – index the social framing of an utterance and can indicate shifts in footing: “a change in the alignment we take to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance” (Goffman 1981: 128). Importantly, contextualisation cues do not emerge *a priori* from pre-existing or stable associations between context and language, but are part of the process of context and meaning creation.

The pragmalinguistic study of digital media since the late twentieth century, which focusses on “speech-like” written interactions mediated through computers between geographically separated participants, has further problematised understandings of context. This is due in part to the observation that online interactions are characterised by a “doubling of place” (Moore 2004), in the sense that digital media makes relevant virtual as well as physical spaces, entailing complex processes of contextualisation (Androutsopoulos 2014; Tagg, Seargeant & Aisha Brown 2017). The fact that interactants do not typically share a physical space, and thus do not have access to the contextualisation cues available in face-to-face interaction (such as prosody), means that people must discursively co-construct shared communicative spaces (Lyons 2014), often through visual and largely text-based resources such as respelling and emoji. This understanding of online context has been shaped by the epistemological stances and data collection methods characteristic of digital media studies, which has tended to assume a distinction between the “offline” and the “online”, approaching the study of the latter through analysis of screen-based digital data, rather than (for example) seeing new media as a communicative tool used by people in real-world contexts (Androutsopoulos & Staehr 2018). Whilst “blended data” (whereby screen data is complemented by participants’ elicited commentary) is now standard practice (Androutsopoulos & Staehr 2018: 121), some studies go further in exploring the integration of digital media into people’s offline lives, and the fluid transitions between offline and online contexts (Cohen 2015; Jones, Chik & Hafner 2015). Thus transhistorical pragmatics

must engage with the challenge of delimiting “context” in digital spaces, and how it might be retrieved.

The difficulty of establishing context is also pertinent to the analysis of historical language practices. Historical pragmatics, a sociologically-based approach which relies on “empirical data in context”, focussing “on the joint negotiation of meaning” (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2010: 4), addresses the challenge of historical context by undertaking analysis within three (related) frames. The first, “pragmaphilology”, seeks to understand the properties of a text or texts of a particular historical period in the original communicative context; it therefore shares a similar focus on context as digital media studies in the interpretation of language practices. The second, “pragma-historical linguistics”, looks at the “communicative causes of language change” (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2010: 14), examining how the requirements of a speaker, and the shape of their communicative context, including technological developments, informs the development of English (and other languages) across time. A third framework, “diachronic pragmatics”, takes the synchronic evidence considered in “pragmaphilological” approaches, and explores the connections and developments that link such evidence across different time periods. The main challenge of each approach arises from the limited ability to define and understand what constitutes context in the past: “the further removed the period under scrutiny is from our own, the more difficult it is to develop an accurate picture. What looks familiar might have had different meanings [... and] motivations guiding communicators may differ in unpredictable ways” (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2010: 12). Elsewhere, other linguistic disciplines, as they become more fine-grained and therefore contextualised in their approach (e.g. Brinton 2017 on syntactic change), are also grappling with this problem and developing methodologies in response. Corpus-based research, in particular, can provide a useful point of contrast, and a means of checking the validity of interpretative assumptions (Brinton 2017; Hilpert & Gries 2016).

2.3 The diachronic aspect

With important exceptions (discussed below), both historical and present-day studies of language-in-use have neglected the *historical* dimensions of context. Recognition that the significance of context cannot be constrained to the immediate setting and situation is evident in Malinowski’s (1923) descriptions of the cultural events surrounding the language use of

the Tobriand people of Papua. This could only be understood, as Halliday and Hasan (1985: 6) put it, with reference also to “the whole cultural history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices they were engaging in, determining their significance for the culture”. In line with this, central to many studies of language-in-use is the recognition of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) or the historical body; the recognition that people bring to interactions a history of personal experience and an understanding of wider cultural and social norms and genres (Scollon & Scollon 2004). But this needs to be matched with a foregrounding of concern for other historical aspects of a communicative encounter, such as space or communication technologies. In their study of “metrolingualism”, Pennycook and Otsuji (2015: 137) explore “the city as palimpsest as different texts in different languages are written over each other”, considering the implications this has for our understanding of present-day communicative practices.

A transhistorical pragmatic approach foregrounds the historical dimensions of context, focussing on the development of technologies and social practices, to enrich our understanding of contemporary language practices. The approach thus examines the historical development of a feature and/or practice diachronically (cf. diachronic form-to-function and function-to-form mapping within historical pragmatics). A **diachronic reading** might consider, for example, the way in which new media spelling in the early twenty-first century is built on existing patterns of non-standard spelling in pre-digital texts like graffiti, and how it diffused from internet chat forums to SMS (e.g. Shortis 2016). The specific temporal range – spanning decades, centuries, or even millennia – should be sensitive to the linguistic feature and associated technologies in question. In this chapter’s discussion of historical orthography, diachrony is considered firstly by situating spelling practices in their respective historical contexts, and secondly by tracing the development of individuals’ orthographic styles within their lifetimes.

Transhistorical pragmatics is therefore aligned with historical pragmatics proper. A robust historical pragmatic approach should investigate the phenomenon of interest closely, and in context; it should be comparative, between one time frame and another; and it should also consider the evolution of function and form (Taavitsainen & Jucker 2010: 6-7). Our intention is not to dilute the field, but instead offer an approach with a different emphasis that is compatible with, and complementary to, existing work. Transhistorical pragmatics is aligned explicitly with the practices of a selected context, i.e. twenty-first century digital media, which it seeks to contextualise through comparison with earlier (or later) practices and

contexts: to check what is new, how it is new, and why that might be the case. In doing so, it utilises analytic approaches that are comparable with those developed within historical pragmatics: contextualised interpretation; comparison with other time periods; and an attention to both similarities and differences between the evidence. Indeed, transhistorical pragmatics can also be understood as a disciplinary effort to build bridges between scholars of the history of the English language and those working with digital media. As this chapter illustrates, the conversations taking place within different parts of English language studies show as many parallels and connections as the orthographic practices in old and new texts.

3. Digital spelling in context

A transhistorical pragmatics approach to non-standard spelling variants in SMS text messaging in the UK at the turn of the twenty-first century entails that the data be understood within the synchronic social, technological and ideological contexts. The present discussion is inevitably selective, but aims to provide a demonstration of transhistorical pragmatics “in action”.

“SMS spelling” can be contextualised within a broad timescale as an orthographic development correlating with the end of the print age, and the corresponding rise of the digital. As a linguistic phenomenon, it is an output of a highly literate and educated society, in which ideas about spelling are implicitly and explicitly shaped by the ideology of standards (Milroy & Milroy 1999); that is, by “a set of beliefs in the need for an unchanging standard, even where this is not evident in actual language practices” (Tagg 2012: 312). Despite the wide scope for variation in spelling, both “licensed” (Sebba 2007) and otherwise, English spelling in late modernity is often defined as “knowing how to write words correctly” (Kress 2000: 1), with “respellings” defined as forms which depart from the standard, codified forms found in formal writing (Androutsopoulos 2000; Sebba 2007). Against this broader backdrop, the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed what was described in contemporaneous academic literature as a “media panic” around SMS spelling (Carrington 2005; Shortis 2016; Thurlow 2006).

The same academic studies sought to identify, categorise and interpret patterns of respelling within and across texting communities, showing how respelling as a meaning-making resource was being exploited in the performance of online identities and expressions

of group belonging (e.g. Hard af Segerstad 2002; Tagg 2012; Thurlow 2003). These arguments drew on ideas around the meaning-making potential of spelling (and particularly respelling) as a social practice, as outlined by Sebba (2007) who discusses a wide range of spelling practices from sixteenth-century missionary-led spelling reform to the Ali G websites of the early twenty-first century. However, whilst there was some acknowledgement of the relationship between SMS spelling and orthographic practices in older technological contexts, the focus of these empirical studies was primarily on the new. Whilst understandable, this narrow perspective nevertheless entailed that much of the academic discussion was rather insular and isolated, reaffirming and even exoticising differences (Herring 2008: 75) without necessarily acknowledging continuities. The work tended to foreground non-standard forms, rather than exploring the role that respelling played “as part of the text’s orthographic *regularities*” (Androutsopoulos 2000: 517; our emphasis). In this respect, Shortis’s (2007: 13-14) metaphor of the “extended orthographic palette” is useful in tracing continuities between a period which prioritised the “normative binary choices of print technology” and the subsequent legitimisation of other orthographic choices through the ubiquity and popularity of text messaging and other informal contexts of digital writing. Academic accounts of SMS text messaging as a language – a “mini-language” or supervernacular, in Blommaert’s (2012) terms – also overlooked the intersections and continuities with antecedent (including non-printed) spelling practices.

Contrary to the dominant media narratives of a “broken” spelling and society, empirical evidence suggests SMS spelling does not represent a break in practices from those established elsewhere in time and space. Instead, SMS respelling draws “upon a tradition of vernacular spelling” (Shortis 2007: 21) remediated through the material constraints of the new medium; “remade by users in their practices” (Shortis 2007: 23). These older practices are primarily located in creative texts (adverts, trade names, song lyrics, literary fiction, comics) and in what Sebba (2007) calls “unregulated” contexts ranging from graffiti to personal correspondence. Respelling practices are attested in the handful of studies examining older technologically mediated contexts such as telegrams (O’Brien 1904), postcards (Gillen & Hall 2010) and nineteenth-century letter-writing (Kessler & Bergs 2003). In the late twentieth century, the semiotic constraints of early, text-based, computer mediated communication – such as internet relay chat, bulletin boards, forums – encouraged users to draw on pre-existing text-based resources (such as spelling) to carry out the pragmatic work accomplished in face-to-face contexts through paralinguistic cues

(Georgakopoulou 1997). These early practices – which included the invention of the smiley and adoption of angled brackets to delineate the representation of actions – then entered into public consciousness as a “global mass practice” (Shortis 2016: 489) in text messaging. What appeared to some as alien and unintelligible – and was discursively positioned as such by the media – is in fact part of contextualised and dialogic practice: as Deumert (2014: 142) puts it, “similarities are established with existing forms, and existing patterns are exploited, but at the same time writers are able to break through existing molds and invent forms that are unpredictable and original”. SMS spelling arose from the same processes and principles as other kinds of linguistic variation. Texters sought to express themselves by drawing on existing (linguistic) resources, and to manipulate and extend them into forms and practices that in time acquired new and shifting meanings.

Despite the relatively short history of the mobile phone, the SMS spelling practices of the early millennium can be reconceptualised as a technologically motivated phase in its ongoing development. In the second decade of the twenty-first century (with the advent of 4G and smartphone technology), the initial technological constraints driving respelling diminished (Shortis 2016). At the same time, there was growing (academic) recognition that respellings were far less frequent and less “harmful” than initially assumed (Tagg 2012). Studies of children’s texting practices suggest that respelling often correlates with high literacy achievements (Plester, Wood & Joshi 2009), showing how respelling in the digital age can constitute a deliberate and principled departure from a standard form, reframing SMS spelling not as ignorant or lazy but as playful, self-aware, and socially meaningful.

Yet our understanding of SMS spelling remains limited and partial; existing accounts lack perspective in terms of how distinctive and innovative digital spelling practices really are. To achieve this, the application of context needs to be expanded from the immediate environment – the context typically focussed on by new media analyses of spelling – to encompass a broader longitudinal view that can provide social, technological and ideological counterpoints; in our case, a transhistorical pragmatic analysis that compares and contrasts digital respellings with spellings used in an earlier, pre-standardisation period.

4. A transhistorical pragmatic exploration of spelling variation

Our comparative study of spelling in text messaging and sixteenth-century English correspondence seeks to situate present-day digital practices within the longer timeframe of personal writing in English. We do so by reframing SMS spelling in terms of orthographic consistency, thereby enabling comparisons with personal writing from earlier periods, such as the sixteenth century, a period in which English spelling is (similar to SMS) highly variable, and yet subject to increasing critique. Sixteenth-century manuscript spelling is a tide-mark in the emergence of the present-day written Standard. In the period, printed texts were regularising around a new norm, although debate continues over whether this was a “top-down” and/or “bottom-up” process (Berg & Aranoff 2017). In manuscripts, particularly correspondence, writers continued to show a more idiosyncratic and variable orthographic practice into the eighteenth century and beyond (Osselton 1982). That is, inter-speaker inconsistency, rather than consistency, was the norm, with writers seemingly deploying individualized spelling repertoires rather than converging to (or deviating from) a centralized Standard system.

Like text messages, handwritten correspondence is a (potentially) intimate and personal mode of communication between remote interlocutors (spatially and temporally). From this perspective, the configuration of social, technological and ideological factors in the sixteenth century provides a point of comparison with SMS spelling, in order to identify the extent to which the practices (so decried in the modern press) are, in fact, new, and the specific qualities of the identified innovations or continuities. As our discussion will show, the practices show a considerable degree of continuity. It is how they come to “mean”, in their technological context, which proves the point of distinction between sixteenth-century epistolary spelling and twenty-first century SMS spelling.

Using a corpus-based approach to reconstruct “repertoires-in-use” (Androutsopoulos 2014), we focus on the micro-level practices of eight individual English (and English-speaking) writers, comparing and contrasting the written variation in the personal letters of four women writers from the second-half of the sixteenth century (Elizabeth I, Bess of Hardwick, Joan Thynne, Elizabeth D’Oyly) with the WhatsApp and SMS text messages of four women (pseudonyms Laura, Kate, Meg, Alice and Joan) in the twenty-first (2004-2014). The selection of women responds, in part, to a mooted sociolinguistic universal that women (due to gendered social structures) are more attuned to sociolinguistic evaluation of variants, and are often more responsive to processes of language change “from above” (Holmes 1993). This potential continuity may provide richer comparative material from across a large

temporal divide. That is not to deny that the life opportunities, such as education, of English women in the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries are very different. The nature of historical material means that the evidence of early modern women’s manuscript spelling reflects that of the most literate classes – the upper ranks – for whom written language played a key role in their daily affairs (e.g. household management, business and personal correspondence).

Although the sixteenth-century women are all from the upper social ranks (royalty to upper-gentry), their educational backgrounds range from cutting-edge diversity (Queen Elizabeth I) to a more limited, functional curriculum (Joan Thynne; see Evans & Tagg forthcoming). The five women writing in the twenty-first century are from diverse backgrounds but can be described as middle class, with all but one (the oldest, Joan) educated to university-level. With the exception of Alice, they are older than the usual subjects of SMS spelling research, which tends to focus on university students, teens and young adults (e.g. Thurlow 2003). Each individual claimed to have started texting at around 2000, in accordance with the wider cultural boom in SMS text messaging. Period 1 data was collected and analysed as part of a larger SMS corpus (Tagg 2012; Tagg 2016); the second period material was collected for the current research (see also Evans & Tagg forthcoming).

Tables 1 and 2 list the corpora for the two periods. The corpora, and the sub-files within them, are of varying sizes, but there is sufficient material to undertake a comparative analysis.

Table 1: SMS corpus

Name	D.O.B	Period 1				Period 2			
		text msgs	words	recipients	2004-7	WhatsApp msgs	words	recipients	2014-15
Laura	1976	801 text msgs	14,786 words	17 recipients	2004-7	1645 WhatsApp msgs	14,660 words	4 recipients (3 from Period 1)	2014-15
Kate	1970	133 text msgs	2492 words	1 recipient	2004-7	114 text msgs	3286 words	1 recipient (same as Period 1)	2014-15
Meg	1976	54 text msgs	1598 words	1 recipient	2006-7	227 WhatsApp msgs	2010 words	1 recipient (same as Period 1)	2015

Alice	1984	61 text msgs	933 words	2 recipients	2005-6	50 text msgs	1360 words	1 recipient (also in Period 1)	2014-15
Joan	1954	58 text msgs	553 words	2 recipients	2004-7	51 text msgs	714 words	1 recipient (same as Period 1)	2014-15

Table 2: Sixteenth-century Women's Epistolary Spelling (SWES) corpus

Name	Lifespan	Period 1				Period 2			
Queen Elizabeth I	1533-1603	7 letters	2844 words	3 recipients	1550-56	13 letters	7501	1 recipient	1590-95
Elizabeth Neville	c.1541-1621	11 letters	2747 words	1 recipient	1576-85	5 letters	1054	1 recipient (same as Period 1)	1594-98
Bess of Hardwick	1527-1608	5 letters	1640 words	2 recipients	1550-60	11 letters	3813	5 recipients	1569-78
Joan Thynne	1558-1612	9 letters	2102 words	1 recipient	1575-90	18 letters	14363	2 recipients (1 also in Period 1)	1595-1603

The analysis focusses on three variables which capture different aspects of spelling consistency:

- 1) individual consistency: how consistent a writer is in their spellings of the same word;
- 2) preferential forms: which spellings of a given word occur more frequently and can therefore be considered a preferred spelling;
- 3) standardness: to what extent does the writer use, or not use, forms associated with the written Standard.

The micro-level focus takes a life-span perspective, tracing the spelling conventions over a decade for each writer, in order to establish how (digital) literacy, social change and technological developments impact on our informants' individual orthographic repertoires, read against larger macro-level trends in English orthography. This entails two diachronic dimensions to the analysis: the comparison of present-day English (PDE) and sixteenth-century English spelling; and the potential development of that spelling across the lifespan of each writer (Period 1 and Period 2), situated within their historical sub-period.

We complement the descriptive analysis with meta-textual insights available for each data set (i.e. "blended data"). This includes interview data for the twenty-first century informants, and embedded meta-linguistic evidence for the sixteenth-century informants. This allows us to ascertain, to some degree, how conscious or marked the identified spelling practices are for these informants. Our study highlights the importance of recognising the situated nature of practices at any time.

5. Consistency in transhistorical spelling practices

Spelling consistency provides a quantitative measure of the extent to which present-day users of digital media, such as text messaging, are genuinely irregular and inconsistent, as compared with the consistency of the spelling of their predecessors, writing in a very different context of literacy (Evans & Tagg forthcoming). Consistency is calculated from the number of variant spellings used by a given writer for a headword. For example, one writer may use four spellings of the headword *dog* across a text or texts, whereas another writer may use only two. The latter writer is considered more consistent, because they use a fewer number of variants. This information provides a baseline from which intra- and inter-speaker practices can be compared, and can contextualise more specific properties.

5.1 Individual consistency

Within the personal communication of our informants across the two periods, we found (among other patterns) a relatively high degree of consistency in spelling practice. In Tables 3-4, the figures represent the percentage of headwords with that number of spelling variants (e.g. in Laura's data, 85.7% of headwords have just one variant).

Table 3: Individual consistency in SMS*

Informant >	Laura		Alice:		Meg		Kate		Joan	
No. Variants	Period 1 (%)	Period 2 (%)								
1 Variant	85.7	86.3	87	90	91	92	94	97	95	99
2 Variants	12.4	12.3	11.4	8.8	8.7	5.7	5.7	2.8	4.6	0.8
3+ Variants	1.9	1.4	1.3	1	0	0.7	0	0	0	0
Total headwords	1984	2172	149	193	240	274	300	318	86	118

*Although the results across speakers show similar practices, the differences in the sizes of individual datasets - which arise from the availability of data in each case - mean that the compared figures should be treated cautiously.

Table 4: Individual consistency in SWES

Informant	Queen Elizabeth I		Elizabeth Neville		Bess of Hardwick		Joan Thynne	
No. Variants	Period 1 (%)	Period 2 (%)	Period 1 (%)	Period 2 (%)	Period 1 (%)	Period 2 (%)	Period 1 (%)	Period 2 (%)
1 Variant	81.5	69.4	68.6	76.1	67	58.8	48.5	48.3
2 Variants	17.2	27.6	28	23.1	27.4	32.8	37.6	39.6
3 Variants	1	2.4	2.7	0.7	4.5	6.8	8.8	8.9
4 Variants	0.3	0.5	0.8	0	1.1	1.2	2.6	2.2
5 Variants	0	0.2	0	0	0	0.3	2.1	0.7
6 Variants	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	0.3
Total Headwords	297	656	261	134	179	323	194	598

In the SMS corpus, between 85% and 99% of all word forms are spelt the same way by any one individual (an average of 92%). Most of the variation arises from words with two variant spellings; only three women spell any one headword more than two ways, with the highest number of variants occurring for the headwords *you* (Laura=5; Alice=4), *tomorrow* (Laura=5) and *brother* (Laura=4). For each individual, this variation makes up less than 2% of the total headwords. These findings suggest SMS spelling does not constitute a “new language” but is, as Shortis (2007: 22) puts it, “a constrained variety of writing with some alterations in spelling and grammar”. In SWES, the four women also tend towards a one-variant spelling for the majority of words, with one- and two-variant spellings comprising over 80% of spellings. One-variant spellings are less well-established than in the present-day material, comprising an average of 62%. The most variable spellings have six variants: *there*, *received*, *desiring* (all in the letters of Joan Thynne) and *faithful* (Bess of Hardwick’s letters). Such findings show how a transhistorical approach can put SMS spelling variation into perspective, by highlighting the continuing (and potentially growing) predominance of consistency in a (female) writer’s orthographic style, irrespective (perhaps) of the technological innovations. However, this summary plays down the evidence of inter-speaker variation within both corpora. In the SMS corpus, Laura is the least consistent speller (one-variant forms account for around 85% word types), while Joan is very consistent (> 95% one-variant forms). In SWES, Joan Thynne is the least consistent (48% one-variant forms) with Elizabeth I the most consistent (73% one-variant forms).

The variation between contemporaneous informants could be explained on the basis of literacy levels. The early modern informants had differing levels of education and experience in using the written word. Elizabeth I received one of the most comprehensive, multilingual educational curriculums of the Renaissance, and Elizabeth Neville also received an education in languages other than English. By comparison, what is known of Bess of Talbot’s and Joan Thynne’s education suggests it was more restricted to the basics of (vernacular) reading and writing (Evans & Tagg forthcoming). This implies a rough correlation between educational opportunities and the level of consistency for each woman’s spelling which could be investigated through statistical analysis of a larger dataset.

Education provides a less obvious explanation for the (smaller) inter-speaker differences for the SMS corpus. The four present-day women were recipients of a standardised education system; moreover, all except Joan (the most consistent speller) progressed to higher education. Although the current sample permits only tentative

interpretation, in line with studies of respelling and children's literacy achievements (Plester, Wood & Joshi 2009) the results seem to point to an inverse relationship to that in SWES: (higher) education might be seen to promote, rather than curtail, inconsistency. This association likely reflects other aspects of the informants' biographical experiences, including their age (which may explain Joan's higher levels of consistency). The data also point to the possibility of individual preference and the development of personal writing habits. Laura stands out as being the most variable speller, and there is no obvious demographic reason why she should spell differently from Meg, who is the same age and has a similar educational background. In interview in 2014, Laura attributed her respelling practice to what we might call an ideology of "functional efficiency" – i.e. she suggested that few of her respellings carried indexical meaning but were an ingrained response to the communicative demands or technological constraints of the medium: "I always felt as though it was an easier way of writing ... it makes more sense to use a shorter version which means the same thing".

Intra-speaker variation - that is, the extent to which each informant's spelling consistency changes over time - provides another means of transhistorical pragmatic comparison. In the SMS corpus (c.2004-7 and 2014-5), the data for each woman shows no statistically-significant change in consistency over the course of a decade. This appears to contradict current assumptions that technological developments have led users to abandon respelling and abbreviation practices (Shortis 2016). Instead, the evidence suggests that SMS spelling is (now, at least) as much a response to the communicative demands of text messaging as it is to the technological constraints (Thurlow 2003) and also points to the possible formation of spelling habits. In SWES, the pattern is mixed. Thynne and Neville are more consistent in their later correspondence. Bess of Hardwick and Elizabeth I become less consistent. Whilst differences in word counts could influence these trends, it seems tenable that any coherent step-change toward or away from spelling consistency would be observable.

The analysis thus highlights consistency as an enduring feature of orthographic practice across time, in that, although variation is permitted (pre-standardisation; digital media), people are on the whole remarkably consistent: most words are spelt in one or two ways. This (as well as other evidence, discussed below) suggests there might be more continuity than difference between the spelling practices of the past and the twenty-first century digital age.

5.2 Preferential forms

The individual variation identified above suggests that writers in both periods have their own preferences. However, it is important to differentiate truly individualized (idiosyncratic) practices from preferences with a broader, potentially sociolectal, status. For example, in the SMS corpus, both Alice and Laura vary their spelling of the headword *you* in more than two ways, but all variants reflect forms and functions attested elsewhere: the letter homophone <u> is found across datasets (e.g. Thurlow 2003) (as well as in Kate's and Meg's data) while the colloquial respelling <ya> is used by numerous SMS users in an attempt to approximate a speech-like quality (Androutsopoulos 2000; Thurlow 2003). Of more interest is the extent to which an individual's practice departs from that of her interlocutors – something we cannot properly gauge from the one-sided datasets used in this analysis. However, previous analysis of Laura's SMS exchanges reveals a consistent use of the spelling variants <u> and <wot> (Tagg 2016) that are not shared by her interlocutors (nor the four women discussed here). The spellings are part of Laura's distinctive orthographic idiolect, resistant to communication accommodation or local orthographic norms. The high frequency, common-core status of these words perhaps makes them more salient candidates for individual preferential respellings.

Sociolectal and idiolectal orthographic variants are evident in the early modern data, as well. 170 words (6.7%) in SWES have three or more variants, with many of these words showing variation across two or more datasets. This offers evidence of a broader commonality in practice e.g. *been*, *great*, *have*, *loving*, *might*, *much*, *received*, *sayeth*, *think*, *very*, *with*, *worshipful*, *would*. Closer analysis reveals that the 3+ variant words share a co-occurrence of common letter-form substitutions in early-modern English. For example, the omission or inclusion of final <e> accounts for 37% of variant spellings in SWES, and alternations of <u/v>, <i/e/y> and <w/u> are also widespread. These variants are typical of contemporary manuscript (and print) spelling practice in the period (Salmon 1999; Kaislaniemi et al. 2017). This evidence supports the interpretation that spelling variation, as a principle, was the norm for these women. Such spellings constitute the typical “noise” of sixteenth-century epistolary orthography.

However, there are also idiolectal spellings reminiscent of those identified in Laura's SMS messages. This includes words spelled distinctively yet consistently, such as Elizabeth

I's preferred spelling of *which* <wiche> and Neville's preferred spelling of *you* <yower>, both of which are rare in contemporaneous print and manuscript materials (Evans & Tagg forthcoming). Other idiosyncracies include words where higher inconsistencies – such as the spelling of proper names and placenames, which were less “fixed” in form in the sixteenth century – are not always found. Thus, whilst Bess of Hardwick spells *Cavendish*, her surname during her second marriage, four different ways in five occurrences, and Elizabeth Neville uses four variants across 11 occurrences for her first name, Elizabeth I spells her name the same way throughout her life; a practice linked both to reasons of security (the spelling was part of an elaborate signature which was difficult to forge) and also status, through an authoritative link between the royal sign manual and the royal prerogative (Evans & Tagg, forthcoming; Evans forthcoming). Notably, in material not included in the SWES corpus, Bess of Hardwick also adopted a fixed onomastic spelling upon her third marriage to George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, in the 1580s (Wiggins 2016). The spelling trends for proper names testifies to the importance of a contextualized reading when exploring variation. In this case, the social meaning of consistent spelling can only be recognized against the contemporary cultural norms.

The survey of spelling in SMS and SWES suggests that, for writers in both time periods, spelling is part of their idiolectal repertoire. What is less clear from the textual evidence is its possible role in identity performance and thus any enduring link between identity and spelling. Metalinguistic evidence can be helpful in shedding light on the potential pragmatic meanings of spelling variation for the present-day and early-modern informants. In interviews with the twenty-first century writers, this involved identity claims. For example, Laura saw some respellings, such as g-dropping, as overtly evaluative and indexical of particular stances including indignation on behalf of a friend: “He cant keep gettin pissed and treatin you like that” (Tagg 2016). Similarly, in her explanation of why she stopped using the homophone <u> between the two phases of data collection, Alice constructed its use as childish and no longer “cool” (“I hate using shorthand like u, c and 4 nowadays, I think I see it as something that a young person or a child does”); beliefs that she claimed to draw on when evaluating a friend's continuing use of the homophone. In short, the metalinguistic evidence suggests that informants saw (some of) their own respelling practices as indexical and evaluated those of their interlocutors in the same way.

In SWES, metalinguistic commentary is fairly limited. Joan Thynne and Elizabeth Neville draw attention to the speed of their letters' composition: e.g. “euen so in haste with

my beste Loue to your good selfe I ende” (Thynne), and thus provide an excuse for any shortcomings in the letter’s content or stylistic form. Both Bess of Hardwick and Queen Elizabeth I use the noun *scribbling* to characterise their writing: the word denoted careless, hasty or thoughtless written expression in the period (OED Online). Bess of Hardwick also describes her correspondence as *rewde*, meaning “unlearned” or “unrefined” (OED Online), and Queen Elizabeth I apologises for her *tedious* and *long* writing. The remarks indicate that the letter’s text is to be viewed as intermediary agent, a textual representation of the author. However, whilst these metalinguistic comments indicate the symbolic capital of epistolary writing for the women, they do not highlight spelling directly. *Scribbling* arguably encompasses multiple facets of writing, which may include spelling, but this is conjectural. No letter-writer in the dataset draws attention specifically to spelling practice. The metalinguistic commentary suggests that spelling was not a sufficiently salient feature for any of the four women to warrant explicit comment in the material included in the corpus.

5.3 Standardness

The preceding analysis highlighted points of continuity as well as contrast between the spelling practices and nature of consistency in the SMS and epistolary datasets. However, to conclude our analysis it is necessary to consider these findings in relation to the dominant language ideologies of each period. While some commentators describe the digital age as representing a shift in practice and ideology from the conformity of print age (Thompson & Collins, this volume), SMS spelling variation is nonetheless produced in a context in which respellings are interpreted in terms of their deviance from a prescribed standard form. Early modern correspondence, on the other hand, operates in a pre-Standardised context. The relevance, or lack thereof, of the Standard to each datasets’ spelling practices is evident in the proportion of Standard spelling forms used in each corpus. In the SMS corpus, 97.8% of headwords include a variant that uses the Standard spelling. By comparison, only 53.3% of headwords in the early modern correspondence use a form that matches the subsequent Standard spelling. The Standard, in its top-down prescribed form, is not a relevant conceptual construct, nor a formal system, for the sixteenth-century writers. Whilst print spelling was beginning to regularise, there was no wide-spread agreement or enforcement of a particular set of English spellings: spelling was acquired individually, and shaped through local networks (Kaislaniemi et al. 2017). On this basis, we propose that sixteenth-century spelling variation should be read within an “a-standard” frame – a term preferred to “pre-standard”

because it does not presuppose the later development – given that sixteenth-century English spelling, in manuscript contexts, was not prescribed.

Thus, whilst the spelling practices are similar in the two datasets, and one can find continuities between them, their social meanings and motivations are potentially very different. This has two implications for how we understand spelling consistency and its constituent parts in the SWES and SMS datasets. Firstly, the proportion of two or more variant spellings in the SMS messages may have a greater social and semiotic weight for its reader than, say, the 52% variance identified in the sixteenth-century letters of Joan Thynne. As non-standard spelling is “marked” in PDE, the least consistent forms, even in a text message, would draw the attention of the reader in a way that the persistently variable spelling of a sixteenth-century letter may not have (for its intended readership, cf Sönmez 2000). In making this argument, we draw on Androutsopoulos’s (2000) distinction between “regular” spellings – those that occur in a patterned manner across a text – and “exceptional” ones that stand out from the surrounding text by departing from the text’s regular spelling patterns and thus serve as local contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1982). The potential salience of non-standard spelling in the twenty-first century means it can be used in “exceptional” ways for local functions within a text, such as signalling a change in footing, in a way likely not possible in sixteenth-century writing. For example, Tagg (2016) shows how Laura uses mainly standard spelling when arranging by text message for a friend to join her for a drink, and then keys a switch into a more colloquial speech-like register with the eye dialect form <wot> alongside other non-standard semiotic resources, as she writes ‘Wot can i get in for ya?’ (that is, what drink can she buy her friend). By comparison, an “exceptional” use of spelling variation seems a less viable resource for pre-standardisation writers, because the lack of a standard frame entails a less definitive baseline from which a spelling can depart and thus accrue meaning (cf Sebba’s 2007 “zone of social meaning”). Whilst SWES suggests some points of deviation that may have acquired significance (the consistent spelling of <Elizabeth>, the use of idiosyncratic forms <wich> and <yower>), on the whole the pre-standard context reduces expectations among readers for consistency, and potentially impedes recognition of any attempts to build meaning around such exceptional variation.

Secondly, in relation to the regular use of spelling, while Androutsopoulos (2000) focuses on a community’s orientation to spoken language in their spelling practices, our data suggests that spelling regularities can also be indexical of an individual voice. Thus, while for a sixteenth-century reader orthographic inconsistency may not be pragmatically meaningful,

the relative consistency of Elizabeth I's manuscript spelling may be recognisable, forming part of the queen's epistolary identity (co-occurring with other epistolary features, such as her distinctive handwriting) and indexing her learning and her social uniqueness when compared with her (female) contemporaries. Conversely, the levels of consistency in the text messages likely signal each writer's participation within an emergent sub-culture of text messaging and their positioning within the immediate participation framework vis-a-vis their interlocutors, as well as their wider media/language ideological stances. Within the social, cultural and ideological context of the twenty-first century, the choice of a standard rather than non-standard form has meaning potential for interlocutors, whose interpretation will be shaped both by the prevailing ideologies of spelling standards and by their awareness of an "extended orthographic palette" in text messaging, where the standard form is just one choice among others (cf Staehr & Madsen's 2014 study of the use of standard resources in online rap). In sum, we argue that consistency itself can act as a contextualisation cue (Gumperz 1982), signalling the kind of exchange that is taking place (such as its mode, and authorial stance), when contrasted with the contemporary conventions of other media and genres of the sixteenth- and twenty-first centuries.

6. Conclusion

Transhistorical pragmatics seeks to enable a more informed understanding of technologically mediated communication by identifying continuities in practice which transcend cultural and historical particularities. In this chapter we applied the approach to analysis of SMS spelling, situating it in a transitional period between the print and digital age, and comparing it with orthographic practices in the personal correspondence of the pre-standardised era. By adopting an analytical framework developed for analysis of sixteenth-century spelling, we directed attention away from the perceived novelty of respelling in SMS text messaging and foregrounded orthographic consistency as the more significant property of personal writing, both across the individual lifespan and between two historical periods. The fact that writers diverge in their use of standard forms is unsurprising, given that those in the digital context work within a frame of standardization which is not comparable to that of early modern vernacular letter-writing (Evans & Tagg forthcoming). Before Standardisation, consistency itself can be a marker of exception – signalling for example Elizabeth I's unique social position. Post-Standardisation, the consistent use of standard or non-standard forms can index the extent of individuals' alignment with an emergent sub-culture, whilst enabling "exceptional" respellings to take on local pragmatic functions. Our analysis suggests that

spelling variation has always been a feature of personal correspondence and that it has, albeit in more limited and varying ways, been a resource for identity construction. SMS spelling generated alarmist media accounts in the early twenty-first century not because it represented a radical break in practice, but because of the perceived salience and novelty of the new technology, and a bias against youth culture (Herring 2008). These alarmist accounts were fuelled by a focus on what *appeared* different, rather than on any underlying patterns of inconsistency.

However, our contention is not that digital media spelling continues a pre-standardisation tradition which was disrupted, or interrupted by, the conventions and binary of print (cf Thompson & Collins, this volume). Our approach shows how SMS spelling should be understood as a *product* of the print age, and the associated processes of standardisation enabled by the printing press, widening education, and mass technologies of communication. The potential for variation in spelling to “mean” has been enhanced, if not transformed, by the ideology of standards and the “standard” frame through which readers now interpret texts. When digital writers respell, they are usually playing with standard forms and the degree and nature of its deviation (Sebba 2007); thus, as suggested by our analysis, the ability or inclination to respell may in fact correlate with higher academic literacy (cf Plester, Wood & Joshi 2009). This means that, far from being a threat to established orthographic and social conventions, SMS spelling is, in a sense, only made possible because of the conventionalised, literacy-related constraints in which it operates.

In conclusion, a transhistorical pragmatic approach enables us to see how contemporary social, technological and ideological factors have come together to create a context in which spelling variation can take on greater potential for social meaning than was possible in the “a-standard” context of the sixteenth century. In evaluating respelling’s impact, we would do well to recognise both the ongoing influence of the Standard and the enduring pull towards orthographic consistency.

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