The decline of Sibilant Interchange in Older Scots Correspondence

Emily Gough, The University of Edinburgh

Between the 16th and 18thC, Older Scots (OSc), the West Germanic language spoken in the Lowlands of Scotland, experienced significant change in both status and structure due to contact with English and its emerging standard. This study investigates the social and structural spread of this anglicization by exploring the distribution of an emblematic OSc feature – Sibilant Interchange (SI). Crucially, gender difference and how it affected the rate of change in spelling practice is discussed.

Anglicization did not affect all textual genres the same, with correspondence, the genre most 'speech-like' and often not meant for wider consumption, among the last to have anglicized (e.g., Devitt 1989). This study uses data from the Helsinki Corpus of Scottish Correspondence (ScotsCorr, Meurman-Solin & VARIENG 2017), which contains c.417,000 words from male and female (21%) letter-writers dating from the key anglicization period (1540-1750). The letters are predominantly autograph (in the hand of the sender) and have been diplomatically transcribed (see Laing & Lass 2006), which allows studies to correlate change in orthographic practices to metadata on year, location, and social factors related to the sender and addressee (including gender).

Previous OSc scholarship considers SI salient (e.g., Johnston 1997), though there are differing views on its origin and development, and thus far it has not been the subject of an in-depth analysis. SI is most evident in word-initial position, especially in the modal shall/should, (OSc sal/suld), with OSc having /s/ rather than /ʃ/. By tracking the change of the initial graphemes in these words, this study evaluates the change from the pre- anglicization OSc /s/ variants sal/suld to the post-anglicization English /ʃ/ variants shall/should as these are the most frequent /ʃ/>/s/ examples in ScotsCorr. The three graphemes under consideration are the traditional OSc <s>, the incoming English <sh>, and the trigraph <sch> which represented /ʃ/ in OSc (Bann & Corbett 2015: 33). As expected, the <s> variant is more popular in the earliest period but is replaced with <sh> over time, following an s-curve pattern (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the <sch> variant appears only in the first part of the 17thC, which is the period of most rapid change, suggesting this is not simply a change in spelling practice, but a change in

pronunciation, too. Indeed, this is in line with the idea that some speakers changed their pronunciations before catching up with the new spelling practices.

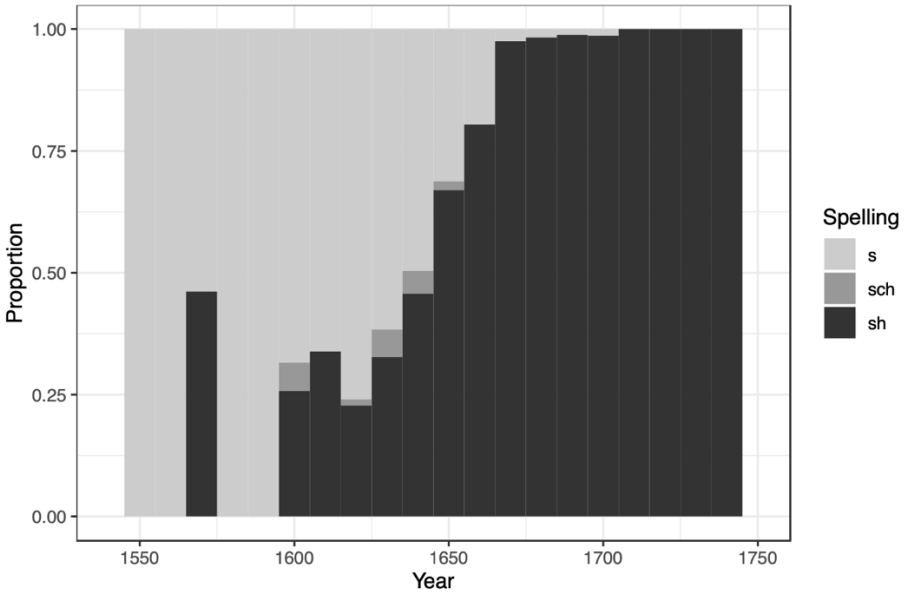

Figure 1. Proportion of spellings for 'should'/shall' by 10-year period

Regarding gender differences, the data suggest that women may indeed be ahead of men (Figure 2) in adopting the innovative variant, which agrees with present-day sociolinguistic patterning (e.g., Labov 2001). This is a surprising find especially as women were substantially less likely to be able to write. Analysis of a selection of the leaders of this change explore this pattern further.

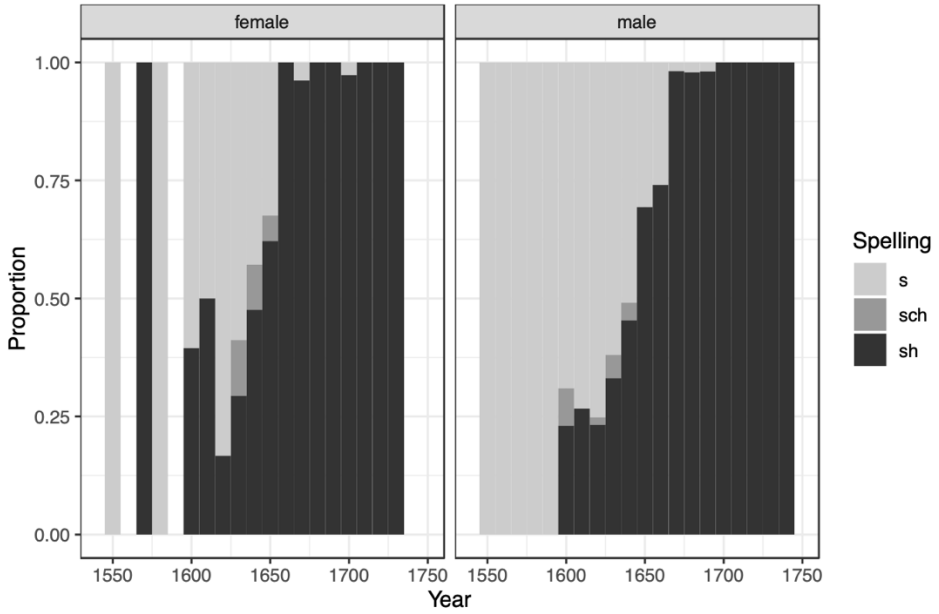

Figure 2.Proportion of spelling of 'should'/'shall' for male and female writers

Works Cited

Bann, Jennifer & John Corbett. 2015. *Spelling Scots: the orthography of literary Scots, 1700-2000*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Devitt, Amy J. 1989. *Standardizing written English: diffusion in the case of Scotland, 1520-1659*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Johnston, Paul. 1997. Older Scots Phonology and its Regional Variation. In Charles Jones (ed.), *The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*, 47–111. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change: Social Factors.* Vol. 2. 3 vols. Oxford: Blackwell.

Laing, Margaret & Roger Lass. 2006. Early Middle English Dialectology: Problems and Prospects. In Ans van Kemenade & Bettelou Los (eds.), *The Handbook of the History of English*, 417–451. Oxford. Hoboken, UNITED KINGDOM: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ed/detail.action?docID=351558. (5 August, 2022).

Meurman-Solin, Anneli & VARIENG. 2017. *Helsinki Corpus of Scottish Correspondence (1540-1750)*. Text corpus. University of Helsinki: Kielipankki. http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:lb-201411071.