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"The Linguistic Consequences of Being a Lame" … in Medieval England[1]

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The study of ties and membership in social networks and the engagement of speakers in joint enterprises has revealed that common practices can be sociolinguistically indexical and consciously used in constructing and projecting social identity. In fact, the nuclear or peripheral position of members in peer-group activity has been shown to strongly condition their relative sociolinguistic behaviour. The aim of this article is the exploration of individuals' membership status through their linguistic production in late medieval England, when the conception of a national linguistic variety of English was emerging. An analysis of *was*- and *were*-levelling processes in the past tense conjugation of *be* is carried out on the collection of private correspondence of the Paston family, written during the fifteenth century (1425-1503) by different generations of this gentry dynasty from Norfolk. The study of the sociolinguistic behavioural patterns for this variable in the letters provides us with a new in-group dimension for core members and "lames" on the basis of their shared verbal practices and networks, employed to preserve the values of the group and its identity within the community. In the context of loose-knit social networks with weak ties, some linguistic choices may tend to transmit adherence to a focused variety and become a trend for imitation. However, isolated members may perfectly happily persist in adhering to vernacular practices, and as such occupy a less crucial position in terms of the diffusion of linguistic innovations within the community.

[1] To the Memory of William Labov

Keywords: standardness, social networks, lames, competence, performance, double-voicing.

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"Las Consecuencias Lingüísticas de ser un 'Lame'" … en la Inglaterra Medieval

El estudio de los vínculos y la pertenencia a redes sociales y la participación de los hablantes en actividades colectivas ha revelado que las prácticas comunes pueden ser sociolingüísticamente indexicalizadas y utilizarse conscientemente para construir y proyectar identidad social. De hecho, se ha demostrado que la posición nuclear o periférica de los miembros en la actividad del grupo de iguales condiciona en gran medida su comportamiento sociolingüístico relativo. El objetivo de este artículo es la exploración del estatus de pertenencia de los individuos a través de su producción lingüística en la Inglaterra medieval tardía, cuando emergía la concepción de una variedad lingüística nacional del inglés. Se lleva a cabo un análisis de los procesos de nivelación de *was* y *were* en la conjugación del pasado *be* en la colección de correspondencia privada de la familia Paston, escrita durante el siglo XV (1425-1503) por distintas generaciones de esta dinastía de la alta burguesía de Norfolk. La observación de las pautas de comportamiento sociolingüístico de esta variable en las cartas de los escritores nos proporciona una nueva dimensión intragrupal de los miembros del núcleo y de los "lames" en función de sus prácticas verbales y redes compartidas para preservar los valores del grupo y su identidad dentro de la comunidad. En el contexto de redes sociales débiles, múltiples vínculos débiles, algunas opciones lingüísticas tienden a transmitir lealtad a una variedad bajo foco y se convierten en tendencia de imitación; sin embargo, los miembros aislados pueden persistir perfectamente adheridos a las prácticas vernáculas y ocupar una posición menos crucial para la difusión de innovaciones lingüísticas dentro de la comunidad.

Palabras clave: carácter estándar, redes sociales, lames, competencia, actuación, doble voz.

1. Lames and their Treatment of the Standard and Vernaculars

The exploration of variation and vernacularity[2] (or non-standardness) has always constituted the foundational object of study in the field of sociolinguistics (see also Dittmar and Schlobinski 1988; Hamilton 2001). Assuming the orderly heterogeneity of speech communities and following Labov's variationist model, the sociolinguist's interest focuses on the observation of uncareful and spontaneous performance in everyday contexts and its socially and/or stylistically conditioned differences from competence.

[2] Vernacularity and the vernacular are not conceived here as a style as they are in common usage, but rather, as a non-standard variety or local dialect, as it is usually understood in Sociolinguistics (Labov 2006 [1966], 86): "This word [vernacular] is commonly used to mean low, uneducated or low prestige speech, but I have tried to stabilize it as a technical term to signify the language first acquired by the language learner, controlled perfectly, and used primarily among intimate friends and family members. Thus every speaker has a vernacular, some quite close to the network standard, some quite remote from it".

Processes of standardisation and supra-localisation in different languages have also been frequent objects of study in historical sociolinguistic research, as in the case of English. Before 1400 approximately, there was no uniform written variety of English in England, but rather an amalgam based on local and regional dialects. This multidialectal situation during late medieval times resulted in the incipient Standard variety being a contact-derived dialect developed out of the mosaic of medieval dialects, having koineisation, levelling, supralocalisation and interdialect as its main processes and outcomes (Trudgill 1983a, 1986, 2004; Smith 1992; Nevalainen 2000; Kerswill 2002; Schaefer 2006a; Wright 2013, 2020c; or Auer 2018). The formation of 'proto-standards' is a collective model of good usage acquired in local and professional networks rather than through institutional instruction (Benskin 2004; Deumert 2004, 5-6; Smith 1992, 56-57; Dodd 2011a; 2011b; 2012; Stenroos 2020). Thus, the crystallisation of Standard English seems to have been an unconscious development of surpralocalised varieties that later became the national standard (Benskin 2004; Wright 2000b, 2013, 2020c), its course being "shown not to be a linear, unidirectional or 'natural' development, but a set of processes which occur in a set of social spaces, developing at different rates in different registers in different idiolects" (Wright 2000a, 6).

As a result of regional mobility, probably due to the magnetism of London, supralocalisation occurred as a natural process in England during late medieval times, induced by interpersonal contact, and without language planning policies. This social and geographical diffusion of regional forms and their ultimate incorporation into what was later to become the incipient Standard English *koiné* took place within a scenario of social, linguistic and cultural bidirectional contact between London and the provinces, due in large part to the social mobility mentioned above, and their subsequent mixture (Wright 2020a, 4). The encounters of London traders with those from other regions of the country as well as Continental Europe were crucial for the emerging contact variety (Wright 2000a, b, 2020a, c; Kitson 2004; Stenroos 2020; Miller and Falchetta 2021): "Doing business with people from afar acted as a means of linguistic diffusion, of levelling, of introduction of regional features from elsewhere […] and, for foreign merchants, as a catalyst for a learners' target" (Wright 2020b, 30-31).

For this reason, the late medieval and early modern period in England was also one of significant social changes, and it was these which conditioned –if not triggered– linguistic changes (Bergs 2012, 544-48). The increase in the population and its mobility after the thirteenth century and the subsequent rapid expansion of urban areas and commercial interaction –albeit with the hiatus of the fourteenth century as a result of the Black Death and its consequences– fostered the development of intensified dialect contact and linguistic convergence. As Nevalainen (2003, 130) notes, "the unprecedented growth and urbanisation that took place in early modern London made it a focal point for dialect contact, and something of a linguistic melting pot". These linguistic dynamics occurred in parallel with a broader societal restructuring. Unlike the feudal structure based on the hereditary characterisation of people, a permeable

status-based social system developed that had a dominant middle-class group who were mobile and influential 'social aspirers' (Horrox and Ormrod 2006): As a result, "[s]ocial network structures changed and led to supra-regional standardisation, the awareness of good and bad language as a marker of social distinction developed, and the middle classes became educated and literate and turned into a powerful driving source of linguistic change (and stability)" (Bergs 2012, 547).

In consequence, a contact variety behaving as a supra-regional linguistic norm for written English arose during the first half of the fifteenth century, acting as an embryonic national standard and competing with vernaculars. As Labov (1973, 107) stated: "[T]he vernacular culture itself is equally constant from one urban area to another; the grammar is just one of the many elements of the social pattern which is transmitted". As in contemporary societies of the industrialised Western world, the concepts of 'aspirers', 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are crucially relevant here in the context of the vernacular world and its social structure. *Aspirers*, according to Chambers (1995, 95), are those persons "with social ambitions that stretch beyond their immediate social domain", including usually upwardly mobile speakers who want to achieve membership of a different social group (such as immigrants who want to become part of the new society, or age/class-specific individuals who want to participate in a particular group culture). *Insiders* are those core members at the centre of a social group, closely involved with its activities and entity, exhibiting patterns of verbal use which tend to be somewhat dissimilar to those of the ordinary members. *Outsiders*, in contrast, are isolated individuals at the edges of the social group, without full participation in the patterns of language use and change that are characteristic of the group, akin to/the same as Labovian 'lames' (1973). Originally, the term 'lame' started to be used by components of the Afro-American vernacular culture to define those isolated and solitary marginal members of their social peer-group in a derogative fashion: "To be 'lame' means to be outside of the central group and its culture; it is a negative characterization and does not imply any single set of social characteristics" (Labov 1973, 84). Conceptually, Labov differentiates between 'social lames' and 'linguistic lames'. The former refers to individuals within the community with some kind of physical or mental weakness, or figuratively to an uninteresting person or situation. The latter alludes to isolated and solitary members within the street culture who are more unfamiliar with vernacular (non-standard) norms and whose grammar shows the influence of other dialects (i.e., users of less regular varieties). As Labov notes (1973, 81): the grammatical "rules that are categorical for the vernacular are often variable for lames".

2. Objectives

Language projects social meaning through a speaker's choice and use of sociolinguistic variation. As Tannen (2005, 3) stated: "[W]hen people talk they communicate not only information but also images of themselves", and this is because "language as a social phenomenon is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of society" (Trudgill 1983b, 19). Given its indexicalisation, the regionally, socially and/or stylistically-

based variation in a speaker's verbal production inevitably transmits identitarian, ideological or attitudinal significance and affiliation (Hernández-Campoy 2016, 51-62).

Insiders, as core members of the group, as well as aspirers and outsiders (lames) play their own role in the community ecosystem of the vernacular world, where the vernacular behaves as an idiosyncratic mark that incontestably belongs to the collective group, and not to the individual: "Its consistency and well-formed, systematic character is the result of a vast number of interactions; the group exerts its control over the vernacular in a supervision so close that a single slip may be condemned and remembered for years" Labov (1973, 83).

The aim of this article is the exploration of the microcosm of a Norfolk gentry family, paying particular interest to their sociolinguistic behaviour as well as the social meaning they construct and project through the East Anglian vernaculars of the Early Modern English period, when the ideology of a national standard was emerging. The analysis of the family members' private correspondence will show that the sociolinguistic situations of their dialogic exchanges are not always the same in terms of addressivity, recipiency and relationality, reflecting the multiplexity of social networks and personal communicative styles of the writers depending on their relationship with the recipient, situation and reason for the written communication. In turn, this will permit the measurement of each individuals' membership status –as aspirers, insiders or outsiders– through their linguistic production in terms of the intensity, density and multiplexity of the interlacing relational networks of the family members, as well as their social mobility and the nuclear or marginal roles they occupy within the Paston dynasty. In fact, the role of membership and peer group pressures (social ties) in the choice of language variants within the social networks framework have revealed that shared values and practices are often sociolinguistically indexical and are consciously instrumentalised in order to construct and project ingroup social identity. In fact, the nuclear or peripheral position of members in peer-group activity strongly conditions their relative sociolinguistic behaviour (see Milroy 1980).

3. Methodology

3.1. Linguistic Variable

In Medieval and Renaissance times, literacy was conditioned by social conventions, status and locality (Daybell 2001). In historical sociolinguistic research, the high illiteracy rate in those periods makes the treatment of authorship a controversial issue when used as a socio-demographic independent variable (Bergs 2005, 2015; Wood 2007). There is sociohistorical evidence which strongly suggests that the use of scribes was a common practice for written correspondence, especially among the female population, who relied on clerks or chaplains connected to the family. In addition, even if women were literate, they had different levels of access to literacy education than men. Methodologically, therefore, there is a risk of misinterpreting authorship and gender, and this would clearly distort the representativeness of informants and thus the reliability of results (Schneider 2002, 76; Hernández-Campoy and Schilling 2012).

Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that while texts transcribed from literal dictation show the grammatical and lexical features of the person that dictates, they do not reveal their usual spelling habits (Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 1999; Bergs 2005, 2015; Nobels and van der Wal 2009; Cutillas-Espinosa and Hernández-Campoy 2021). If the morpho-syntactic and lexical features present in a dictated text are assumed to be part of the author's regular linguistic practices, on the contrary, the orthography of the text will be related to the scribe's graphological custom. For this reason, the linguistic variable used for this study is a grammatical one: *was*-levelling and *were*-levelling in the context of mood distinction, especially when the evolution in the verbal system entailed the extinction of the subjunctive during the gradual transition from the Middle- to Early Modern English periods.

The analysis of *was*/*were*-levelling was carried out through the scrutiny of past *be* forms after their codification for the type of subject form (1st, 2nd, 3rd personal PROnouns; 3rd person Noun Phrases; and 3rd person Existentials, all in singular and plural) both in indicative and subjunctive contexts.

3.2. Informants: The Paston Family

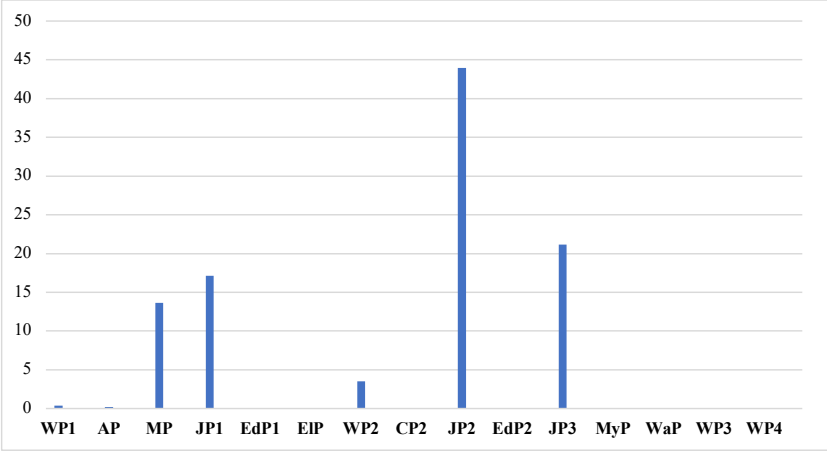
The informants under observation for this research were 15 members of the Paston family from Norfolk (East Anglia) born between 1378 and 1479, and whose biographical information is well-documented (Davis 1971, 1983; Barber 1993; Bergs 2005; Wood 2007, among many others). The Pastons became 'nouveau riche' landowners, belonging socially to a minor rank of gentry who were ambitious and highly mobile. Although Clement Paston was a humble peasant at the end of the fourteenth century, his descendants evolved to attain a middle-high social status, as personified in William Paston I –a professional lawyer– as well as in John II and John III –knights and members of the court nobility (figure 1).

Figure 1. Family tree of The Pastons (from Bergs 2005, 61)

Generation I	*William I* (1378-1444) (WP1) *Agnes Berry* (?1400-1479) (AP)
Generation II	*Margaret* (?1420-1484) (MP) *John I* (1421-1466) (JP1) *Edmond I* (1425-1449) (EdP1) *Elizabeth* (?1429-1488) (EIP) *William II* (1436-1496) (WP2) *Clement II* (1442-?1479) (CP2)
Generation III	*John II* (1442-1479) (JP2) *John III* (1444-1504) (JP3) *Margery* (?1455-1495) (MyP) *Edmond II* (?1443-?1504) (EdP2) *Walter* (?1456-1479) (WaP) *William III* (?1459-after 1504) (WP3)
Generation IV	*William IV* (1479-1554) (WP4)

As for the individuals' importance within the family, and according to their epistolary production, as Bergs (2005, 69-71) shows, John I, John II, John III and Margaret Mautby held the most nuclear role within the family (writing between them 74.4% of the letter collection), followed by Edmond II and Agnes Berry. In contrast, members such as Walter, William I, William III and William IV reflect considerably less engagement, occupying peripheral roles. The classification of the social groups addressed by the Paston family members used for this study is based on their status (historical ranks) and the nature of their relationship with recipients (Raumolin-Brunberg 1996, 26). The social status of addressees and their relative degree of epistolary interaction provide us with a quantitative index of our informants' interpersonal relations as well as of the complexity and density of their social networks, both of which inextricably condition their language choice and use in their private correspondence. In order to obtain an index of social networks for each informant, the number of words in their letters was multiplied by the number of letters, addressees and social groups (figure 2 and table 1).

Figure 2. Index of Social networks in the Paston family
(*x*-axis= Paston members and *y*-axis= social networks index)



3.3. Linguistic Archival Source: The Paston Letters

The recent advances in the digitalisation and processing of historical materials are enabling the study of ego-documents at various levels (genre categorisations, registers and text types) in order to reconstruct the context and conditioning factors for sociolinguistic variation and change in communities from the remote past (Nevalainen and Tanskanen 2007; van der Wal and Rutten 2013). The validity of epistolary documents in historical sociolinguistics has been demonstrated to be highly significant in studying the nature, motivation and direction of language change, both longitudinally and cross-sectionally: i.e., among groups of speakers at a macro-level

and how it progresses at a micro-level as experienced by a single individual (see Eckert and McConnel-Ginet 1992; Palander-Collin, Nevala and Nurmi 2009). Regarding the relationships between orality and writing, personal letters (i) are the most oral among the different written genres, (ii) afford a prolific source of information on more uncareful styles, (iii) are envisaged as dialogic exchanges where addressivity, recipiency and relationality are decisive factors that reflect the author's social networks, the nature of the social relationship involved (personal-professional), the purpose of the letter, and thus personal communicative style of writers and (iv) are a useful tool to explore the function of contact as a result of epistolary mobility in terms of the transmission of linguistic changes and their impact on urban and regional vernaculars (Moore 2019).

The archival linguistic source used for this study was the *Paston Letters*, which is included in the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* and available through free online access at the University of Michigan (accessed on March 10, 2022). With 246,353 words, this corpus constitutes a compilation of 422 authored manuscripts written between 1425 and 1503 by members of four generations of this minor gentry Norfolk dynasty. The historical and linguistic interest in this collection of private correspondence is exceptional because of the data it provides on life in late medieval England at both the political and domestic level and within the framework of the War of the Roses (1455-1487) at the dawn of the new period and the subsequent crystallisation of what later became standard English.

4. Results and Analyses

As table 1 and figure 3 show, collectively, *were*-levelling is more frequent (45.7%; #330/722) than *was*-levelling (0.37%; #4/1076) in the pooled results, with differences being highly statistically significant ($p<0.01$; $\chi^2 = 587.0994$; $df=1$). When distinguishing mood, *were*-levelling has a higher presence in the subjunctive (67.5%; #270/400) than in the indicative mood (18.6%; #60/322), this again having high statistical significance ($p<0.01$; $\chi^2 = 171.6623$; $df=1$). The fact that *were*-levelling is more often found in subjunctive contexts (67.5%) reveals that the form *were* was still associated with subjunctive mood, and thus did not constitute proper levelling. Our informants and their epistolary production (1425-1503) are located within the transition from the Middle to Early Modern English periods temporally and, linguistically, they are immersed in the process of the move from indicative-subjunctive mood distinction to mood disappearance, part of the general shift from a synthetic to an analytic language system.

Table 1. *Was/were* levelling according to mood distinction in the Paston family (%=Percentages; #Raw data; N=Total instances; NF=Normalised frequencies)

		INDICATIVE				SUBJUNCTIVE									
Informant	Levelling	%	#	N	NF	%	#	N	NF	Total-N	#WORDS	#Letters	#Addressees	#Social Groups	Social Networks Index
WP1	*was*	*9%*	2	22	2.45	*0%*	0	2	2.45	24	8,160 (2.84%)	12	13	4	50.9 (0.39%)
	were	*0%*	0	6	0	*100%*	3	3	3.67	9					
AP	*was*	*1.6%*	1	62	1.27	*0%*	0	0	0	62	7,865 (5.21%)	22	7	2	24.2 (0.18%)
	were	*33.3%*	2	6	2.54	*100%*	8	8	10.1	14					
MP	*was*	*0%*	0	316	0	*0%*	0	24	0	340	67,847 (25.36%)	107	8	3	1742 (13.6%)
	were	*10.4%*	13	124	1.91	*70.2%*	99	141	14.5	265					
JP1	*was*	*0%*	0	144	0	*0%*	0	6	0	150	33,198 (10.43%)	44	30	5	2191 (17.1%)
	were	*15.3%*	6	39	1.8	*64.8%*	35	54	10.5	93					
EdP1	*was*	*0%*	0	2	0	*0%*	0	0	0	2	502 (0.47%)	2	2	2	0.040 (0.0003%)
	were	*0%*	0	0	0	*0%*	0	0	0	0					
ElP	*was*	*0%*	0	5	0	*0%*	0	0	0	5	3,969 (0.95%)	4	4	3	1,90 (0.014%)
	were	*0%*	0	0	0	*100%*	1	1	2.51	1					
WP2	*was*	*0%*	0	71	0	*0%*	0	0	0	71	15,418 (7.82%)	33	22	4	447 (3.4%)
	were	*50%*	14	28	9.08	*82.3%*	14	17	9.08	45					
CP2	*was*	*0%*	0	11	0	*0%*	0	0	0	11	3,303 (1.66%)	7	1	1	0.23 (0.001%)
	were	*0%*	0	6	0	*100%*	8	8	24.2	14					
JP2	*was*	*0%*	0	162	0	*0%*	0	9	0	171	49,551 (20.38%)	86	22	6	5625 (43.9%)
	were	*23.2%*	10	43	2.01	*55.3%*	52	94	10.2	137					
EdP2	*was*	*0%*	0	14	0	*0%*	0	0	0	14	3,856 (1.90%)	8	5	2	3.08 (0.02%)
	were	*0%*	0	2	0	*100%*	2	2	5.18	4					
JP3	*was*	*0.6%*	1	159	0.22	*0%*	0	11	0	170	43,993 (18.25%)	77	20	4	2709 (21.1%)
	were	*21.8%*	12	55	2.72	*65.2%*	45	69	10.2	124					
MyP	*was*	*0%*	0	9	0	*0%*	0	0	0	9	2,658 (1.42%)	6	1	1	0.15 (0.001%)
	were	*0%*	0	0	0	*100%*	1	1	3.76	1					
WaP	*was*	*0%*	0	13	0	*0%*	0	0	0	13	1,327 (0.95%)	4	4	2	0.42 (0.003%)
	were	*0%*	0	0	0	*0%*	0	0	0	0					
WP3	*was*	*0%*	0	33	0	*0%*	0	1	0	34	4,569 (2.13%)	9	3	2	2.46 (0.01%)
	were	*25%*	3	12	6.56	*100%*	2	2	4.37	14					
WP4	*was*	*0%*	0	0	0	*0%*	0	0	0	0	137 (0.24%)	1	1	1	0.001 (0%)
	were	*0%*	0	1	0	*0*	0	0	0	1					
Totals	*was*	*0.39%*	4	1023	0.16	*0%*	0	53	0.08	1076	246,353 (100%)	422	143	42	12799.57 (100%)
	were	*18.6%*	60	322	2.43	*67.5%*	270	400	10.9	722					

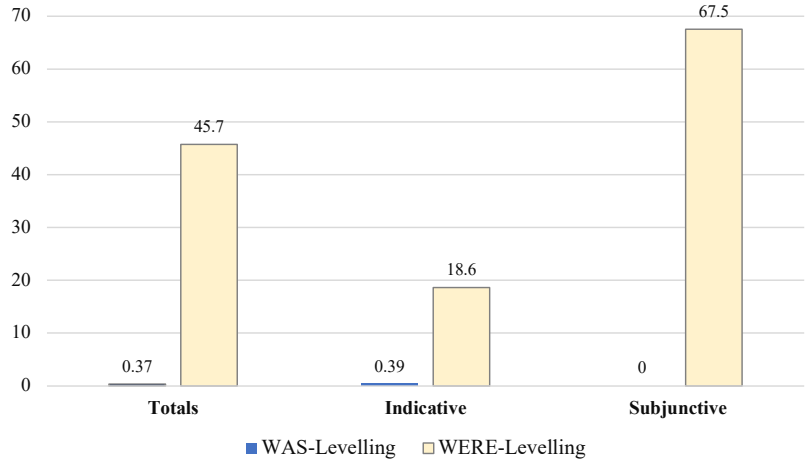


Figure 3. *Was/were* levelling in the Paston Family according to mood (percentages and normalised frequencies)

Figure 4 shows that both genders make use of *were*-levelling to a similar extent in pooled results (males: 46.7%; #206/441; females 44.1%; #124/281), differences not reaching statistical significance ($p>0.05$; $\chi^2 = 0.4618$; df=1). However, when mood is taken into account, male informants make more use of *were*-levelling in indicative (23.4%; #45/192) than do females (11.5%; #15/130), the difference being significant ($p<0.01$, $\chi^2 = 7.2389$; df = 1), which represents the divergent or innovating construction and thus constitutes a proper case of levelling. But in subjunctive, it is females that show higher frequencies (72.2%; #109/151) than men (64.6%; #161/249) –although the difference is not statistically significant ($p>0.05$, $\chi^2 = 2.4274$; df = 1). This suggests that females were more conservative considering that *were*-levelling in subjunctive was the relic use in the process of the extinction of mood differentiation in the English language. This behaviour has been accounted for as it being part of taking a ladylike stance (Hernández-Campoy 2012, 2013) and due to the gender paradox (see Labov 2001, 261-93), behaving more adhered to norms and standardness.

Individually, as table 1 indicates, *was*-levelling appears in the Paston family in just 0.37% of cases (#4/1076), specifically in William I (#2/24), Agnes (#1/62), and John III (#1/170), and only in the indicative mood. All these cases are in 3rd person plural, which might mean that the Northern Subject Rule (NSR)[3] is operating in these data, albeit weakly. This behaviour is also constrained by mood, only occurring in indicative cases (#4/1023; 0.39%), as pool results show in *Totals*. Language and dialect contact would seem to be the most plausible explanation for the unexpected presence of the Northern Subject Rule in a region where the Southern Subject Rule reigned (see Klemola 2000;

[3] The Northern Subject Rule consists of the use of *-s* suffix in present tense with Noun Phrase plural subjects (*The boys likes chocolate*) but not with adjacent subject pronouns (*They like chocolate*) (see Britain 2002).

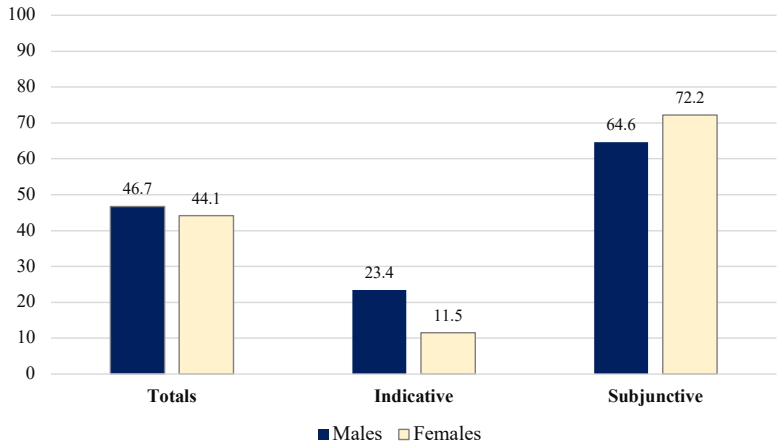


Figure 4. *Were*-levelling in the Paston Family according to mood and gender (percentages)

De Haas and Van Kemenade 2015). That said, no instances of the 'autochthonous' Southern Subject Rule (SSR) (typical with plural subject pronouns) appear here, which might mean that this is a change that happened in the later stages of the history of the East Anglian English variety.

As figures 5 and 6 show with normalised frequencies (NF), the main Paston members using *were*-levelling in *was*-contexts with indicative mood are William II (50%; NF=9.08) and William III (25%; NF=6.56). In contrast, Clement II (100%; NF=24.2) and Margaret (70.2%; NF=14.5) are the main users of the receding *were*-levelling in subjunctive. Elizabeth, Clement II and Margery did not make use of *were*-levelling in indicative but did in subjunctive.

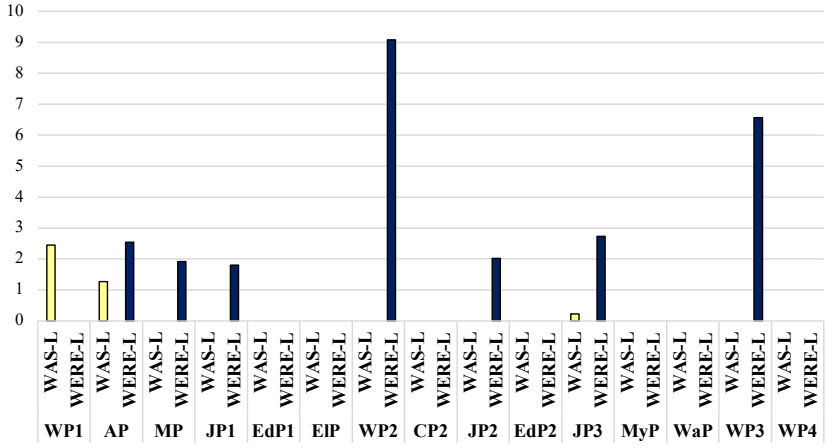


Figure 5. *Was*/*were*-levelling in the Paston Family, by member, in indicative mood (normalised frequencies, NF)

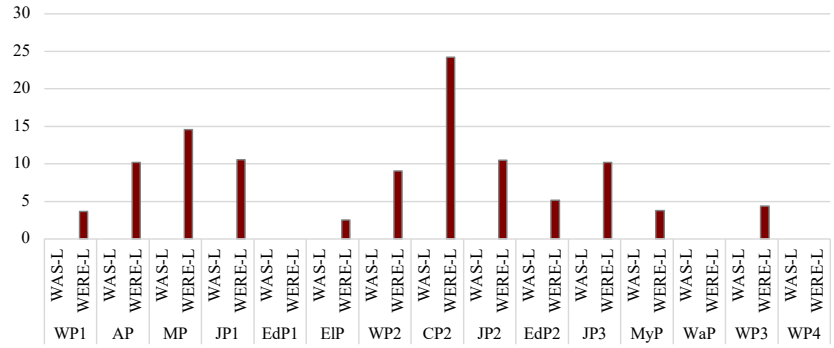


Figure 6. *Was*/*were*-levelling in the Paston Family, by member, in subjunctive mood (normalised frequencies, NF)

These patterns of heterogeneity and variability found in the use of *was*/*were*-levelling towards the end of the Middle English period may lead us to conclude that it is a symptom of the strong process of the extension of the *was*-form to conjugationally expected *were*-contexts and the consequential conflict with the speakers' competence resulting in confusion and linguistic insecurity. Such confusion could also have led to hypercorrection, a process by which speakers mistakenly applied the incorrect form in an attempt to adhere to perceived grammatical norms (see Trudgill 1983a, 1986).

However, the use of *was*- and *were*-levelling among the Pastons is also crucially conditioned by their mobility and social networks, as well as by their marginal or core position within the family given their differing social activity and exposure. As table 1 and figure 2 show, the social network index for the Pastons suggests that John II (43.9%), John III (21.1%), John I (17.1%) and his wife Margaret (13.6%) were the members of the family who exhibited more interaction. With 107 letters and 67,847 words (25.36%), Margaret Mautby (?1420-1484) was clearly an 'insider' and the 'core' member of the family group, links being mostly internal (letters addressed to her husband, relatives and acquaintances), but also external ones despite her low mobility. She was a businesswoman in control of the administration of their households and manors, occupying an authoritative role within her family and their acquaintance community (Wood 2007, 53). The social 'aspirers' in the family were William I and his wife Agnes, the grandparents. As seen above, as biographical accounts suggest (see Barber 1993, 11-12), the initial social position of the Pastons was not originally as high as it became later in the century: they became 'nouveau riche' landowners, belonging socially to a minor rank of gentry who were ambitious and highly mobile, having evolved from peasantry to influential aristocracy within just two generations. William I (1378-1444) only wrote 12 letters (2.84%, 8.160 words), but they were addressed to various social groups (minor gentry, clergy, legal professionals and nobility), exhibiting his wide social networks. He trained for the legal profession at the Inns of Court in

London, and enjoyed a respectable local reputation serving as counsel for the city of Norwich, as steward to the Duke of Norfolk and later as Justice of the Common Bench with a successful career at the Royal Courts. Agnes Berry (?1400-1479) wrote 22 letters (5.21%, 7,865 words), all addressed to family members. She was the daughter of Sir Edmond Berry of Harlingbury Hall and was married to William I. When younger, she was in control of the administration of the family patrimony.

Other important Paston members were John I (Margaret's husband), and his sons John II and John III, who were also conceptually social 'aspirers', seeking a place beyond the local and supralocal communities, Chambers describes them as having "social ambitions that stretch beyond their immediate social domain" (1995, 95). In fact, social network theory has provided valuable insight into the greater or lesser consistency in the use of vernacular forms by individual speakers. John I (1421-1466) was instructed at the colleges of Trinity Hall and Peterhouse at the University of Cambridge and also the Inner Temple of the London Inns of Court. He took over the family estates and wealth with his wife Margaret and served as Justice of the Peace for Norfolk and Knight of the Shire, as well as Member of Parliament for Norfolk, spending most of his time in London (Davis 1983, xvi). He wrote 44 of the family letters collection (10.43%, 33,198 words) and these were addressed to a wide range of different social groups (his wife, gentry, legal professionals, nobility and royalty). The political careers of his sons John II (1442-1479) and John III (1444-1504) make them two highly social and geographically mobile characters. Biographical sources describe John II as a 'gentleman of leisure', mostly interested in books, tournaments and love affairs. He started at the court of King Edward IV in London, where he became MP for Norfolk. He participated as a soldier in various battles of the War of Roses in the 1470s, both in Britain and also on the Continent (Davis 1971, lviii-lix; Barber 1993, 87-205). He wrote 86 letters (20.38%, 49,551 words) exhibiting the highest index of social networks (relatives, minor gentry, clergy, legal professionals, nobility and royalty). The career of John III (1444-1504) was similar to that of his brother John II, initially travelling in England and abroad serving the Duke of Norfolk. But, unlike his brother John II, John III became less itinerant in the 1470s and 80s and remained in the family manors in Norfolk. He wrote 77 letters (18.25%) with 43,993 words, exhibiting a high index of social networks (relatives, minor gentry, legal professionals and nobility). The three Johns, however, were also 'aspirers' and their linguistic behaviour exhibited some vernacular *were*-levelling in indicative (around NF=3) and the normative *were*-levelling in subjunctive (around NF=10). They all are at the centre of the social group and are closely involved with its activities and linguistic practices. As Labov states: "If peer group pressures are important in maintaining the vernacular in its present uniform state, and in resisting the pressures of other dialects, then those who are most bound by the norms of the group should show the most consistent form of the vernacular. It is the leaders of vernacular peer groups who are most closely governed by group norms" (1973, 98). The linguistic behaviour of these three men, as for the use of the vernacular construction in subjunctive mood, is averagely NF=10-15.

The members of the family that behaved more marginally were Edmond I, (0.95%, 502 words), Walter (0.95%, 1,327 words), Elizabeth (0.95%, 3.969 words) Margery (1.42%, 2,658 words), Clement II (1.66%, 3,303 words) and William IV (0.24%, 137 words), as well as William III (2.13%, 4,569 words) and Edmond II (1.9%, 3,856 words), all of whom addressed all their correspondence to the same group of relatives. They were the 'outsiders' in the family. Very little is known about Edmond I (1425-1449) apart from his education at Clifford's Inn (London) at the age of 24. Walter (1456-1479) studied at Oxford but spent the rest of his short life in Norwich until he died at the age of 23. Elizabeth (1429?-1488) married Robert Poynings in 1458 and then Sir George Browne of Betchworth in 1471. She lived mostly in Norwich. Clement II (1442-1479?) was also educated at Cambridge University but later moved to London, where he wrote his letters (1461-1466), mostly addressed to his brother John I. His correspondence deals with daily matters and problems concerning with the family estates. Margery Brews (?1455-1495) was the daughter of Sir Thomas Brews of Topcroft in Norfolk and became John III's first wife, living in Norwich and later in London. William IV (1479-1554) was also an 'outsider', with no involvement in or commitment to the family affairs according to the letters preserved: one letter written (0.24%, 137 words). He studied at Cambridge and also became a knight.

Of the two conceptions of 'lames' by Labov, these members might be considered social lames: merely distant members within the peer group, "going their own way with their own concerns" (Labov 1973, 84), not having full partnership involvement probably for motivational reasons. If processes of *was*/*were*-levelling are part of the vernacular, Edmond I, Elizabeth, Clement II, Margery and Walter made no use of *was*/*were*-levelling in indicative mood, although some of them timidly show *were*-levelling in subjunctive, the conservative mood structure in the process of extinction at the time. Their linguistic behaviour does not conform to the norms imposed by the vernacular culture (Labov 1973, 98).

William II deserves special attention given that he might be considered as belonging to Labov's second conception of 'lame', for marginal members: a linguistic lame. As Labov (1973, 108) pointed out in his original conceptualisation of 'lames' in reference to African-American vernacular, "the term *lame* serves to remind us that it is the normal, intelligent, well-coordinated youth who is a member of the Black English vernacular culture and who is suffering from the social and educational depression of the ghetto". Admittedly, the social context of the Paston family, as an upper gentry family in Norwich was not that of the Jets in New York. But, as Labov suggested, being a lame did not necessarily mean being peripheral in the core group partnership involvement only for social (mentally, physically, morally, or motivationally defective) reasons, but also linguistically. That is, school values and the perception of the advantages supplied by the dominant culture to the detriment of the peer group and the vernacular world may also characterise lames. In fact, the group members and lames "differ systematically in their grammars as well as in their school performance"

(1973, 84), because "language is one of the most striking and salient emblems of lame status" (1973, 108). From an outsider's viewpoint, lames are much more accessible than group members, and thus potentially more receptive to the magnetism of the standard culture and the advantages of upward mobility through education–a conceptualisation also in line with social network theory (see Milroy 1980; Milroy and Milroy 1985; Fagyal et al., 2010). In fact, given their interaction with individuals from other groups and their lack of full participation in their primary group, a lame may not reach full competence in the vernacular dialect, being on the fringes of vernacular culture, to the extent that they are able to show more contact with and competence in the standard and the dominant culture. Likewise, Eckert's (1989) study carried out in an American high school in Michigan (Belten High) also found two polarising social groups ('Jocks' and 'Burnouts'), where the extent of their speaker's network membership was strongly related to their linguistic practices: urban/suburban and local/non-local worlds. While the Jocks were linguistically more conservative and more identified with the US middle-class and the school values, conversely, the Burnouts were linguistically more innovative and more identified with the US lower-working class and the anti-school culture present in urban Detroit. Other studies have shown similar patterns, such as Mendoza-Denton (2008) with respect to Latina girls in Californian gangs and Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). A similar framework is found in Rampton's (1995) notion of 'crossing' as a peculiar kind of code-switching practice observed in British-born multiracial teens of the English South Midlands and London: the use of forms of language or particular varieties associated with a given social group that the individual does not naturally belong to, as a kind of Bell's (1984) outgroup design.

William II (1436-1496) was also educated at Cambridge University and married Lady Anne Beaufort, who was the daughter of the Duke of Somerset. He frequently travelled to London, acting as MP for several constituencies. He wrote 33 letters (7.82%, 15,418 words) addressed to 22 different recipients from four social groups (relatives, minor gentry, legal professionals and nobility), exhibiting a relatively good index of social networks (3.4%). But he exhibited linguistic and ideological conflict in his behaviour.

He was a prominent user of the vernacular forms: 50% (NF=9.08) *were*-levelling in indicative in sentences with a singular subject (both PROnouns and Noun Phrases, though not in Existentials); in addition to *was* and *were* forms, he also used non-standard spellings such as *wer* (#2), *war* (#3) and *ware* (#6) for *were*, as well as the *were* form (#5) instead of the relative adverb *where*. In turn, he was a user of the conservative *were*-levelling in subjunctive (82.3%; NF=9.08) but a non-user of the innovative *was*-levelling (no-Mood). These figures might suggest a status between a properly engaged 'insider' and a 'peripheral'. This contradictory sociolinguistic behaviour was also diagnosed in Hernández-Campoy (2008), when analysing William II's Letter 82 ('Memorandum on French Grammar', 1450-52?). This document characterises the social expression of his

awareness of the national variety through his description of what was becoming the new standard English grammar of the late Middle English period when attempting to contrast it with French. When exemplifying the verbal system of the English of the 1450s, William II conjugated the present, past, future, conditional and compound tense morphological constructions. However, he did not mention the mood distinction and their indicative and subjunctive forms, despite having been using 82.3% subjunctive constructions in his letters (#14/17, NF=9.08), as example (1) shows.

(1) "[…] so is jn this langgage; were-fore rith nessessary it is knowe þe pronons and þe declinacionis of þe verbis jn þe maner here-after folowyng: [...] I was thow were he was we were ȝe were they were […]"
(Memorandum on French Grammar, 1450-4?)

The omission of the morphology of mood constructions in the English verbal conjugation system may be understood as an indication that mood (and particularly morphological subjunctive) was losing importance and becoming clearly underused as the beginning of the Early Modern English period approached. But in all those cases, which represent 82.3% of his subjunctive constructions, William II uses a subjunctive form (*were*-levelling in subjunctive contexts), instead of the emerging incipient standard *was*-levelling, which would have been the reflection of the tendency towards the new pattern of mood-neutralisation. His comparison of English and French verbal systems brings to light the covert and overt prestige constraints and motivations in his contradictory sociolinguistic behaviour, as well as his 'lame' character. The data reveals that William Paston II was more favourably inclined to: (i) assume the role of the incipient proto-standard English as the prescriptive national language in late medieval England when contrasting French grammatical constructions with English ones and (ii) over-report himself in the direction of the prestige model (if necessary), despite his explicit vernacular production, clearly evidencing a contradictory covert prestige practice.

William II seems to have experienced the linguistic and ideological conflict of a lame, holding loyalties to two different codes, because of contradictory influences from his vernacular family and the emerging Standard English, reflecting the *nouveau riche* landowner origin of his family and the nobility origin of his wife.

When differentiating peripheral members from lames, Labov (1973, 103-4) alludes to age in order to assess a person's capability to shift away from the vernacular, with lames having more competence for code-switching at earlier stages than marginal members:

> [Lames] would normally be considered 'bidialectal' and they would give outside observers the strong impression that they were capable of switching abruptly between the vernacular and a more standard dialect. But even the most casual style in group sessions among these older members shows a distinct shift away from the vernacular. *In general, we do not find*

> *bidialectalism in the simple sense of switching from a new to an older dialect.* […] Turning to the Lames, we observe the same kind of shift away from the vernacular -but at a younger age, with different consequences. The Lames have not passed through the same period of adolescent immersion in the BE [Black English] vernacular culture. Though they arrive at a similar grammatical stance, the Lames do not have the deep experience of the vernacular culture which peripheral members have absorbed.

In the case of William II, he was between 14 or 16 when he wrote the 'Memorandum on French Grammar' and maybe he had not achieved full competence in the vernacular dialect, but, however, his writing shows more contact with and competence in the standard and the dominant culture, like a proper lame. In this way, William II displays a more sensitive sociolinguistic behaviour towards the proto-standard influence by splitting away from the vernacular linguistic patterns in an unsuspected way, which differentiates lames from peripheral members.

5. Conclusion

The disappearance of mood distinction in English and the presence of *was*/*were*-levelling phenomena in vernaculars in late medieval England may provide us with some information on the nuclear/peripheral characterisation of a given community, such as the Paston family. The development of contradictory sociolinguistic behaviours suggests the development of a situation of mood instability. This appears to result from the vigorous extension of the verbal *was*-form to contexts where *were* would be expected. Such levelling created a conflict with speakers' linguistic competence, likely exacerbated by confusion and insecurity. These tensions emerged in the broader context of a fight between the vernacular and the embryonic standard variety within the late medieval English community. According to Labov (1973, 108), although they may provide an inexact or distorted description of the vernacular values and culture, "many of the informants used by linguists and anthropologists are lames – marginal men [sic] who are detached from their own society far enough to be interested and accessible to the language, the problems and preoccupations of the investigator". The adolescent William Paston II constitutes our 'lame', exhibiting his vernacular performance in his writing production as well as his competence in describing the standard language of late medieval England.

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