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From nearing completion to completed

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15.3 From nearing completion to completed

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This section discusses the final stages of four processes of change, showing that, while variation may complicate any attempts at a general sociolinguistic typology of linguistic change, it nonetheless allows us to discern certain patterns that changes display when they are nearing completion and become completed. A recessive variant typically undergoes register change but it can also continue to display gender and social status variation (e.g. *hath*, indefinite *-man* compounds). Moreover, outgoing forms can be grammatically repurposed (*do*) and assigned new socio-pragmatic functions (*thou*).

15.3.1 Time courses of change

Looking at four sets of declining expressions, we found that the use of the second-person pronoun *thou* had largely receded by the end of the 17th century and was confined to specific registers in the next. In fact, estimating the number of *thou* users by the century, no quantitative change was found between the 17th and 18th century in either of the two letter recipient categories considered, family (6%) and close friends (2–3%). There was, however, a noticeable drop in the frequency of the use of the pronoun in letters to family members in the 1700s compared to the previous century (less than one instance per 10,000 words).

A declining trend could also be traced in the frequency of periphrastic *do* in affirmative statements in the 18th century. Although a significant alternative, it had never become the majority choice as a semantically empty tense carrier. The last two decades of the 17th century continued at about the same level of use as the previous decades but the 18th-century data showed a rapid decline in the normalized frequencies of the outgoing form. These frequencies were approaching those reported for Present-day spoken usage in several studies, suggesting that *do* use had already reached its current low-level plateau. However, the levels at which affirmative *do* was used were roughly ten times higher compared to *thou*, which suggests that there was a distinct difference in the relative pervasiveness of these two recessive features – but not necessarily their relative salience, as we will suggest below.

Verbal *-s* spread by means of lexical diffusion, and the most frequent item, *have*, was the last to display the incoming form, the auxiliary *have* being even slower than the main verb. Of the three verbs studied, the incoming forms *has* and *does* were in mid-range in the last two decades of the 17th century, while *says* was already nearing completion. Having passed the 85% mark, the change was completed with
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does and says in the first two decades of the 18th century, whereas has was only nearing completion at the time, and went to completion in the course of the next 20 years. The average number of individuals preferring the outgoing form hath was in the order of 5% during the 18th century, dropping from about one third in the last two decades of the 17th century to 10% in the first two decades of the 18th century, and declining steadily after that.

The linguistic variable of indefinite pronouns with singular human reference is complex in that, apart from one outgoing (-man) and two incoming compound variants (-body and -one), it involves a set of outgoing independent forms (some, any, every, each). The independent forms continued to decline in the course of the long 18th century from about 30% at the beginning to below 10% at the end, while -man compounds lingered on at a 10% frequency throughout the century. As the use of the two recessive sets of variants declined, the variable was reduced to competition between the two compound alternatives, -body and -one. As many as two thirds of the individuals studied preferred the outgoing forms at the turn of the 18th century but their proportion was reduced to one third from the mid-century on.

15.3.2 Sociolinguistic patterning of recessive variants

As noted above, the use of the recessive second person singular pronoun thou was confined to letters exchanged by nuclear family members and, to a lesser extent, by close friends. Moreover, as a form of address, thou could be used to index status and power relations, for example, by parents addressing their children and a husband addressing his wife. A similar trend emerged with periphrastic do in affirmative statements, as it tended to be used more in correspondence with intimates than with more distant recipients. However, the trend was not statistically significant, nor were the writer’s gender or social status, except for the slight overuse of do in affirmative statements by the upper gentry. That, too, may be due to other factors, such as the dominance of that group in the first 20-year period studied.

The relationship between the writer and the recipient correlated to some extent with the outgoing hath variant of have in the first period, although other social variables emerged as more relevant, as was also the case with the outgoing indefinite pronoun variants. As to gender variation, the verbal -th and the independent indefinite pronouns and especially -man compounds continued to be used longer by men than women, confirming the often noted tendency of male conservatism in linguistic change. Social status variation was also detected with these outgoing forms. The hath variant was used longer by members of the clergy and of the lower ranks than by other social strata. The -man compounds were also overused by clergymen and, towards the end of the 18th century, relatively high levels were attested
among the gentry. However, taken together, the outgoing indefinite variants were attested longest among the professionals and members of the clergy.

Sociolinguistic patterning of other kinds could also be detected with the outgoing variants of the singular indefinite pronouns with human reference, which were the recessive forms to take the longest to go out of use in the 18th century. When the writers’ years of birth were taken into account, the decline of the recessive variants proved generational rather than communal and the systematic gender difference prevailed. As to regional tendencies, the independent forms were preserved longer in the North than in London and elsewhere in the South.

15.3.3 Changing indexicalities

The diffusion of linguistic features can, but need not, be connected with the speakers’ awareness and marked by changes in the ways in which the incoming and outgoing forms are evaluated. Evaluation typically involves specialization along dimensions such as colloquial – formal/obsolete, local – supralocal, and vernacular – standard. All the recessive features that we have discussed were canonized in biblical use, the *King James Bible* (1611) and the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), but the ways in which they were indexed in the course of the 18th century did not follow one single pattern.

With *thou*, uses related to register came largely to replace those related to status during the 18th century. Biblical and literary quotes were used to create and maintain interpersonal relations on a more distant level, while creative use of *thou* could license interpersonal intimacy and familiarity between friends. The relative overuse of the indefinite -*man* compounds and the third-person *hath* by members of the clergy, also points to conscious awareness of register associations and formality distinctions but not of the same kind as were created using *thou*. A second-person pronoun, *thou* could index the writer’s involvement with the addressee (“other-involvement”), while, as third-person markers, -*man* compounds and *hath* could not.

*Hath* must have been associated with educated written usage by some writers, but it possibly represented a locally valued regional variant for others. The long history of verbal -*s* provides a good example of a series of changing evaluations with varying degrees of diatopic (regional) and diatypic (register) differentiation over time. Contact between the northern -(e)s and the southern -(e)th created both regional and register differentiation in the south as well as in the north when -(e)th spread there especially in writing in the 15th and 16th century (Moore 2002, Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 177–180). However, comments such as those made by Gil (1619) on *has* being a northern form suggest a continued regional
bias in favour of the retention of *hath* in the south in the early 17th century. Some vestiges of regional distinctions can be detected in individual usage in the CEECE in the 18th century although they are neither frequent nor systematic.

Although the use of affirmative periphrastic *do* was frequent compared to *thou*, for example, its social evaluation is more difficult to judge. One can infer from the linguistic environments it inhabits that ego-involvement is one function that supported the outgoing form: it was preferred with first-person subjects and verbs expressing speech-acts, cognitive process and emotion, in that order. However, there was also a large group of other verbs that co-occurred with noun-phrase subjects and could not be analysed in these terms. Another explanation, often given in studies of *do* in affirmative statements, is also offered here, namely, that the weight of an NP subject could trigger the use of *do* to increase the weight of the VP.

What was the role of the 18th-century normative grammar in these various processes? Chapter 3 and our surveys of the individual changes suggest that it was indirect at best. Poplack, Van Herk & Harvie (2002: 94) summarize in general terms the way in which 18th- and 19th-century grammars treated the outgoing forms that we have discussed:

> Grammars frequently mentioned the co-existence of a high-status innovation and an older variant with a long tradition in educated or formal use. Forms such as *thou*, third-person *-eth* or second-singular *-est*, and unstressed periphrastic *do* in the present and preterite, were all probably near-moribund in common usage for several centuries before grammars were willing to dispense with a reference to them, or to euthanise them as ‘solemn’ or ‘ancient’.