

# Continental English Books and the Standardization of the English Language in the Early Sixteenth Century: 1525-1540

*José S. Gómez Soliño*

UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA

In the long process of normalization undergone by the English language in the early modern period the printing press is generally considered to have been a highly influential contributing factor. Most of the early presses were set up in Westminster-London and they printed mainly books in the vernacular at comparatively affordable prices. By so doing, they added to the recognition and diffusion of the incipient national standard based on the mixed language of the capital. Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable summarize the linguistic impact of the printing press in the following terms “A powerful force thus existed for promoting a standard, uniform language, and the means were now available for spreading that language throughout the territory in which it was understood.” (1978: 200)

The early printers, however, were not linguistic reformers and the study of the texts they produced shows them on the whole not to be above their most enlightened contemporaries as far as variation in language is concerned (Scragg 1974, Gómez Soliño 1984, 1985, 1986). Early Modern Standard English was far from being a uniform variety and, though to a lesser degree than manuscripts, the printed books of that period are not exempt from variant spellings, often phonologically motivated and thus ultimately dialectal in origin (Wylde 1920, Dobson 1955).

Another contributing factor to linguistic normalization, though one less commented upon by the authors of standard textbooks, was the Protestant Reformation. One of the points in the reformers’ agenda was the biblical and liturgical use of the vernacular. The eventual implementation of that program represented again a significant step in the recognition and diffusion of the London-based standard language. The initial phases of the English Reformation were in addition marked by intense polemical and theological debate, which resulted in an outpouring of books and pamphlets eagerly read and contested by the parties concerned (Elton 1977).

In the beginning, however, the advocates of reform were forced to conduct their publishing activities in exile. Thus, the father of the English Reformation, William Tyndale, thought it safer and more convenient to leave England in order to carry out his biblical translations and write his books in defense of Protestantism. He was not the only early reformer to make his way to the Continent. Other leaders of the first generation of English protestants, such as George Joye, William Roye, Robert Barnes, Jerome Barlow, John Frith, and Miles Coverdale, also took advantage of the comparatively milder conditions and better publishing opportunities prevailing in some parts of Germany and the Low Countries. The writings of these and other English protestant exiles have been studied by Anthea Hume (1961a), who has also published (1961b) an annotated bibliography of the English protestant books printed on the Continent from 1525 to 1535.

Anthea Hume’s research, however, wasn’t primarily concerned with the linguistic make up of the texts in question, although an analysis of their language would certainly throw light on the role and contributions of the different people who had a hand in the production of those books. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to offer a first approximation to the language of the early English

protestant books printed abroad and here we will mainly concentrate our attention on their position in relation to the process of linguistic standardization as reflected by contemporary insular chancery documents and printed texts.

As an illustrative case we can mention to begin with a small octavo volume of the New Testament in English printed in 1535, a copy of which can be consulted at Cambridge University Library.<sup>1</sup> The place and printer of this book are unknown. Some information is however given by its second title, which reads: “The newe Testament dylygently corrected and compared with the Greke by Willyam Tindale and fynessed in the yere of oure Lorde God A. M. D. and. xxxv.” The wording of this title repeats almost exactly that of a slightly earlier edition of Tyndale’s revised version of the New Testament printed at Antwerp in November 1534 by Martin Keyser, alias “Martin Emperowr”. From a linguistic point of view the 1535 anonymous reprint is interesting because of its peculiar orthography, specially the frequent use of digraphs involving the use of the letter *e* after (or before) another vowel. Francis Fry (1878: 63-65; cf. also Table 1 below) published a representative list of the most peculiar variants together with the corresponding forms used in the earlier edition dated in November 1534. Fry points out that “some words, *Faether* and *Moether*, for example, are almost always so spelled; (...) some words will be found peculiarly spelled but once or twice; and (...) the frequency of the use of the words as given in the List will be found to vary greatly between these extremes” (65).

How should we then interpret those unusual spellings? In the nineteenth century some people (Roach 1881) advanced the view that the peculiar orthography shown by the Cambridge 1535 copy of Tyndale’s revised edition of the New Testament reflected provincial spellings typical of the South West. Tyndale would thus be fulfilling the promise made in his early days at Little Sodbury that, if God spared his life, he would cause ploughboys to know more of the Scripture than some learned men (Foxe 1563: cf. Daniel 1994: 79). Had Tyndale put out an edition in his local dialect “in earnest pity for the ploughboy and husbandmen of Gloucestershire?” (Anderson, as quoted by Fry 65).

When this hypothesis was put forward little was known about the Gloucestershire dialect in the late and early postmedieval periods. No evidence could be produced to show that those spellings were provincialisms. None of the 19th century scholars involved in the study of Tyndale’s biography and works were aware that “*oe* (= open/close o) is a Worcestershire and Gloucestershire spelling of great frequency in Middle English, and that *ae* (as in a word like *made*) is found, though more rarely, in Worcestershire and Herefordshire; *ie* = i is also found in Worcestershire.” (M.L. Samuels, personal communication). So at first sight it seems that the “provincial spelling theory” cannot in principle be dismissed or disproved.

There are however several reasons why the dialectal character of those spellings should be dismissed. The first objection has to do with their varying frequency. The use of those digraphs varies from almost complete regularity (in a few cases) to almost complete exceptionality. If that orthography was adopted with a fixed design, why was it not used regularly throughout the book? (cf. Fry 1878: 65). A second argument against the provincialism of those spellings lies in the fact that they seem to obey no discernible rule. Both long and short vocalic sounds, in either stressed or unstressed<sup>2</sup> syllabic positions, are liable to be expressed by them. Those spellings are, moreover, inconsistently used, as witness variants such as *naedeth* and *neade* for NEED-, or *haeth* and *heath* for HATH.

But if the unequal distribution, unsystematic character and inconsistent use shown by those variants were not enough to render them suspect, we yet have a more decisive argument against their provincial value. *The Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (LALME) offers an extensive repertoire of all the variants registered in late medieval texts, so that it is possible for us

<sup>1</sup> Imperfect copies of this edition are also kept at the British Library and Exeter College, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *accompaeynye*, *captaeyne*, *certaeyne*, *counsael*, *desolaete*, *fountaeyne*, *mountaeyns*, ... etc. Some of the syllables where the redundant <e> is used can be interpreted as stressed if we assume a Frenchified pronunciation.

now to interpret those spellings in the light of the evidence uncovered by the Atlas. Table 1 below offers a list of some of the peculiar realizations found in the 1535 reprint. Those spellings can be compared with their counterparts in the earlier 1534 edition of Tyndale's translation. They can also be compared with the dialectal preferences for those variables found in the southern part of Gloucestershire, especially in the vicinity of Berkeley, where Tyndale was most probably born and where he worked for a while after his graduation from Oxford (Daniel 1994). Finally, another column gives us information about the status of those variants according to the large inventory of forms offered in the fourth volume of LALME. Table 1 shows that most of the unusual spellings examined not only do not match the forms that prevailed in southern Gloucestershire, but are also unattested anywhere in England in the 15th c.

If the provincial spelling theory can be confidently dismissed, how can we then account for that idiosyncratic orthography? For an adequate answer to this question we must turn our attention to the conditions under which the printing of the CUL misspelt copy was carried out. Tyndale's revised translation of the New Testament was printed in November 1534. In the months that followed its publication there appeared several piratical reprints which, according with the testimony of George Joye, had not been properly supervised by a native English speaker and, as a consequence, show an unusual number of mistakes and false readings. We must remember that the printing of English translations of biblical texts was then a semi-clandestine affair, that their printers often concealed their names and whereabouts, and that Tyndale himself could not leave the privileged Merchant's House at Antwerp without risking being arrested and sent to prison on a charge of heresy, something that finally happened in May 1535. In those circumstances, engaging the services of competent and trustworthy native English proof-readers wasn't always easy and would in any case increase the final price of the product.

The idiosyncratic spellings we have been discussing constitute an extreme and exceptional case. For a better picture of the linguistic practice shown by continental English books we must examine texts that were adequately proofread. This is the case of the three Tyndale texts whose linguistic behaviour is illustrated in Table 2. For comparative purposes I include a list of the forms favoured by the contemporary chancery and London-printed texts, together with an additional column showing the typical South-Gloucestershire forms.<sup>1</sup>

Table 2 shows that Tyndale's printed works exhibit well established variants, such as *hir*, *soche*, *each*, *thorow(e)*, *awne* and *silfe/sylfe*, which are distinctly avoided by the Chancery and the contemporary London printers alike. In some variables, the texts seem to show a change in the direction of the standard form (*hit* > *it*, *eny* > *any*), but in other cases there is still a marked fluctuation (*her* / *hir*, *selfe* / *silfe*, *soche* / *suche*). In most cases the variants in Tyndale's works can be related to the linguistic realizations in Southern Gloucestershire. The only exceptions to that pattern are *awne* and *each*.

Although Tyndale was executed well before he could complete his translation of the whole Bible, the biblical books that he translated were on the whole incorporated into the full versions published after his death. This could be the reason why the early editions of the English Bible printed on the continent still retain most of the linguistic preferences shown by Tyndale's printed works. Table 3 shows the variants exhibited by three different continental editions of the English Bible. The first column to the left corresponds to the first printed edition of the Bible translated by Miles Coverdale and printed at Zurich by Christopher Froschouer in 1535. The second column offers the variants used in Thomas Matthew's translation printed at Antwerp in 1537. The next column lists the forms found in Coverdale's revision of Matthew's Bible. This is usually called the Great Bible and was printed in 1539 partly in Paris and partly in London. Finally, the righthandside column gives us the variants used in Richard Taverner's version printed by John Byddell in London also in 1539. Richard Taverner was a clerk of the Signet. For this reason, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The variants listed in Tables 2-3-4 are based on an examination of extensive samples of the titles/editions mentioned. Since this paper presents a preliminary report of research in progress, no details will here be given as to the sections examined. The author is however convinced that the selection of the samples both in terms of length and distribution warrants the representativeness of the linguistic profiles obtained.

also because his version of the Bible was printed in London, the forms used in this text exhibit the standard realizations at the time and can therefore be used to gauge the degree of linguistic standardization shown by the continental versions. As table 3 shows, the continental editions are on the whole more hesitant in their choice of variants and exhibit significant departures (*hyr, soche, eache, eny, thorow, awne*) from the standard forms.

Not all the English books printed on the Continent in the early sixteenth century were biblical texts. Some were also pieces of polemical writing and propaganda or doctrinal treatises defending protestant views. In order to illustrate the linguistic behaviour of this type of texts we must finally turn to table 4. Here we find the linguistic profile of four texts written by different authors and printed in four different workshops. Although these texts exhibit a less homogeneous practice when compared with the previous ones, we still find in most of them the same range of variants favoured by biblical translations but frowned upon by the chancery scribes and the London printers. Robert Barnes's *Supplication to Henry VIII* is of particular interest in this context since its London reprint of 1534 can be used to illustrate not only the standard forms once again, but also the linguistic nonconformism of the texts printed on the Continent. I must point out in this connection that the present-day spelling of the word EACH appears earlier in the continental books than in their contemporary London printed texts and chancery documents.

So, from the data I have marshalled so far the following conclusions can be tentatively derived:

1. In the early sixteenth century the Chancery seems to still have been a leading factor in the process of linguistic standardization, since chancery documents are on the whole more homogeneous and formally more modern than other types of text.
2. The London printed books generally agree with the Chancery texts and show on the whole a more restricted set of acceptable variants than most other types of text, handwritten or (continentally) printed.
3. The English books printed on the Continent show more internal fluctuation and/or they are linguistically more liberal in their choice of forms than London printed texts.
4. As far as the protestant literature is concerned, the linguistic make up of English biblical, doctrinal or polemical books printed on the Continent seems to have been influenced by William Tyndale's linguistic preferences.
5. And, finally, Baugh and Cable's view that the printing press was a powerful force promoting a standard uniform language must be qualified. On the whole, the continental English books we have been discussing promoted confusion rather than uniformity of spelling.

I must again stress the tentative character of these conclusions. Obviously, more research is needed before their general validity can be firmly established.

#### REFERENCES

- Baugh, A. C. & Th. Cable. 1978. *A History of the English Language*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Daniel, D. 1994. *William Tyndale: A Biography*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Dobson, E. 1955. Early Modern Standard English. *Transactions of the Philological Society*. 25-54.
- Elton, G. R. 1977. *Reform and Reformation: England 1509-1558*. London, Edward Arnold.

- Fry, F. 1878. *A Bibliographical Description of the Editions of the New Testament, Tyndale's version, in English*. London.
- Gómez Soliño, J. S. 1984. *Variación y estandarización en el Inglés Moderno Temprano: 1470-1540*. PhD thesis, University of Oviedo.
- Gómez Soliño, J. S. 1985. William Caxton y la Estandarización de la Lengua Inglesa en el Siglo XV. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 10: 95-118.
- Gómez Soliño, J. S. 1986. La Normalización Lingüística en la Época de Enrique VIII. > Onega, S. 1986: 19-44.
- Hume, A. 1961. *A Study of the Writings of the English Protestant Exiles, 1525-35*. PhD thesis, University of London.
- Hume, A. 1973. English Protestant Books Printed Abroad, 1525-1535: An Annotated Bibliography. *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 8, part II. App. B: 1065-1091.
- McIntosh, A., M. L. Samuels, & M. Benskin. 1986. *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*. Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press.
- Onega, S. ed. 1986. *Estudios Literarios Ingleses: Renacimiento y Barroco*. Madrid, Cátedra.
- Roach, T. 1881. Tyndale's New Testament and the Gloucestershire Dialect. *Gloucestershire Notes and Queries*. 402: 408-9.
- Scragg, D. G. 1974. *A History of English Spelling*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Wyld, H. C. 1920. *A History of Modern Colloquial English*. London, Fisher Unwin.

\* \* \*

TABLE I. IDIOSYNCRATIC SPELLINGS IN CONTEXT OF CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY  
1535 REPRINT OF TYNDALE'S REVISED TRANSLATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

VARIABLE	1535	LALME vol. IV	Southern GLOUCS.	1534
2. THESE	theese	acceptable	□ es(e) / □ eos(e)	these
16. MUCH	moeche	(very rare)	muche / moche	moche
17. ARE	eare	unattested	be□ / bu□ / beo□	are
22. SHALL	shaell	unattested	schal / shal	shall
23. SHOULD	shoeld	unattested	scholde	should*
25. WOULD	woeld	unattested	wold(e)	would*
37. AGAIN	agaeyne	unattested	a≠e(n) / a≠eyn	ageyne
	theare	unattested		
51. THERE	theere	(acceptable)	□ ar(e) / □ er(e)	there
	whaere	unattested	whar(e) / wher(e)	
52. WHERE	woere	unattested	war(e)	where
54. THROUGH	thoorow	unattested	□ orou≠ / □ urgh / □ orw	thorow
	boethe	(very rare)		
85. BOTH	booth	(acceptable)	bo□ e	bothe
93. CALL	caelingē	unattested	[clepe(n)]	callynge
99. COULD	coelde	unattested	cou□ (e)	colde

101. <i>DAYES</i>	daeis	<i>unattested</i>	dawes / daies / dayes	dayes
104. <i>DOES</i>	doeth	(acceptable)	do□	doth
137. <i>GAVE</i>	gaeve	<i>unattested</i>	≠af	gave
142. <i>HAVE</i>	haeve	<i>unattested</i>	habbe / haue	have
210. <i>SAY</i>	sae	<i>unattested</i>	sygge / segge / say	say

\* The predominant variants in Tyndale's printed texts are *shulde* and *wolde*.

TABLE 2. VARIANTS IN THREE OF TYNDALE'S WORKS PRINTED ON THE CONTINENT IN COMPARISON WITH THEIR STANDARD AND DIALECTAL COUNTERPARTS

VARIABLE	S-GLOUCS.	NT: 1526	OBED.: 1528	NT: 1534	CHANCERY	LONDON-PRS
5. HER	HUR(E, her(e, hir(e	HER, (hyr)	HER / HIR, hyr	HER / HIR, (hyr)	HER	HER (hyr, hir, here)
6. IT	HIT, hyt	IT / HIT (yt, itt, hitt, hyt, hytt, ytt)	IT	IT, (yt)	IT / YT	IT (yt, hit)
10. SUCH	SUCHE, soche	SUCHE, soche	SOCH	SOCHE, suche	SUCH(	SUCH(E (siche, sych)
12. EACH	ECHE  ENY	eche, eache  ENY	— — —  ANY (anye, ani, eny)	ECHE, eache  ANY	— — —  ANY (eny)	ECH(E (yche, iche)  ANY, eny, (ony)
16. MUCH	MUCHE, MOCHE	MOCHE	MOCH	MOCHE	MOCH(E, muche	MOCH(E, (myche, miche, muche)
54. THROUGH	□OROUÁ, □urgh, □orw, □orew	THOROW(E, through, (throwe, thorewe, thoro)	THOROW(e (throw, throu)	THOROW, thorowe (through)	THROUGH, (through)	THROUGH(e, thruh(e, thorow(e, thro- rugh, (thorough, throw[e, thurgh, through, troughthor- ought)
98. CHURCH	CHIRCHE, CHURCHE, CHERCHE	— — —	CHURCH (chyrch, chruch)	CHURCH (churche)	CHURCHE	CHURCH(E, chyrche, (chirche, cyrche)
202. OWN	OWNE, OWEN	AWNE, (owne)	AWNE	AWNE	OWN(E	OWN(E
213. SELF	SYLF, SILF, SELF, SULF	SILF(E, sylfe, (selfe, sylffe, silve)	SELFE (silfe)	SELFE / SILFE, SYLFE (sylffe)	SELF(E (selfe)	SELF(E

NT: 1526 = *The New Testament*, 1st ed., printed by Peter Schoeffer, Worms 1526.

OBED: 1528 = *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, printed by J. Hoochstraten, Antwerp 1528.

NT: 1534 = *The New Testament*, 2nd ed., printed by Martin de Keyser, Antwerp 1534.

TABLE 3. VARIANTS IN THREE EARLY EDITIONS OF  
THE ENGLISH BIBLE PRINTED ON THE CONTINENT

VARIABLE	BIBLE: 1535 ZURICH	BIBLE: 1537 ANTWERP	BIBLE: 1539 PARIS & LONDON	BIBLE: 1539 LONDON
5. <i>HER</i>	HER, hir	HER / HYR	HER / HYR, hir	HER
6. <i>IT</i>	IT	IT	IT	IT
10. <i>SUCH</i>	SOCH(E) (such[e])	SOCH(E) (such[e])	SOCH(e) / SUCH	SUCHE
12. <i>EACH</i>	ech(e)	eche / eache	eche / each	ECH(E)
15. <i>ANY</i>	ENY, (any)	ENY / ANY	ENY / ANY	ANY
16. <i>MUCH</i>	MOCH(E)	MOCH(E)	MOCH(E)	MOCHE
54. <i>THROUGH</i>	THOROW(e) (through)	THOROW(e) through	THOROW(e) through	THROUGH(E)
98. <i>CHURCH</i>	CHURCH	church	— — —	churche
202. <i>OWN</i>	AWNE / OWNE	AWNE, (owne)	AWNE, (owne)	OWNE
213. <i>SELF</i>	SELF(E, (sylfe)	SELFE	SELFE	SELF(E)

TABLE 4. VARIANTS IN FOUR ENGLISH PROTESTANT WORKS  
PRINTED ON THE CONTINENT

VARIABLE	REDE ME & BE NOT WROTH Barlowe: 1528 STRASBOURG	SUPPLICACYON FOR THE BEGGERS Fish: 1529 ANTWERP-1	A PROPER DYALOGUE Barlowe: 1530 ANTWERP-2	SUPPLICATYON TO HENRY VIII Barnes: 1531 ANTWERP-3	SUPPLICATION TO HENRY VIII Barnes: 1534 LONDON
5. <i>HER</i>	HER	her	her	HYR, (her, hir)	HER
6. <i>IT</i>	IT (itt, yt)	IT, (yt, hit)	IT, (yt)	YT, it	IT
10. <i>SUCH</i>	SOCHE, (suche)	SUCHE	SOCHE, (suche)	such(e)	SUCHE
12. <i>EACH</i>	EACHE	eche / eache	eche / each	————	————
15. <i>ANY</i>	ENY, (any)	ENY, ANY	ANY	ANY	ANY
16. <i>MUCH</i>	MOCHE	MOCHE	MOCH(E) (muche)	muche	MOCHE
54. <i>THROUGH</i>	THOROW(e) through (throw[e, throug])	thorough	THROUGH (thorough thourough)	THOROW	THROUGH
98. <i>CHURCH</i>	CHURCHE	churche	CHIRCHE (chyrche, church[e])	CHURCHE	CHURCHE
202. <i>OWN</i>	OWNE, (own)	OWNE	OWNE, (oune)	AWNE	OWNE
213. <i>SELF</i>	silfe (selve, selfe)	SILF(e)	SELFE	SELF(E) (selue)	SELFE

\* \* \*