English witness depositions 1560–1760: An electronic text edition

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Abstract

The following is from a servant's testimony, recorded in 1654 in south-east England:

> *[...] this*
> *Informant saied to the said Susan haue a care or els*
> *you will sett the barne on a fire: And the said Susan*
> *replyed if I doe what is that to you, goe about {~~goe~~} your*
> *bussines:*
> *(Essex Record Office, Colchester. Borough of Colchester Informations.*
> *MS D/B5/Sb2/9, the information of Katheryne Perry, 1654)*

Witness depositions like this abound in handwritten manuscripts that are scattered in archives across England. Because of their inaccessibility, these records are largely an untapped source in English historical linguistics. In this article we report on a project currently underway, which aims at producing an electronic text edition of English depositions from 1560–1760. Unlike many previous editions, we will reproduce the original manuscript text as closely as possible; moreover, the electronic format will also allow the edition to be much larger than printed editions. The edition will contain both a transcription and a coded version of the transcription that will enable computer searches, a historical and linguistic introduction, textual notes, and a glossary, as well as a selection of manuscript images. We conclude this article with a case study, by which we illustrate the particular value of our edition of speech-related material for linguistic research.

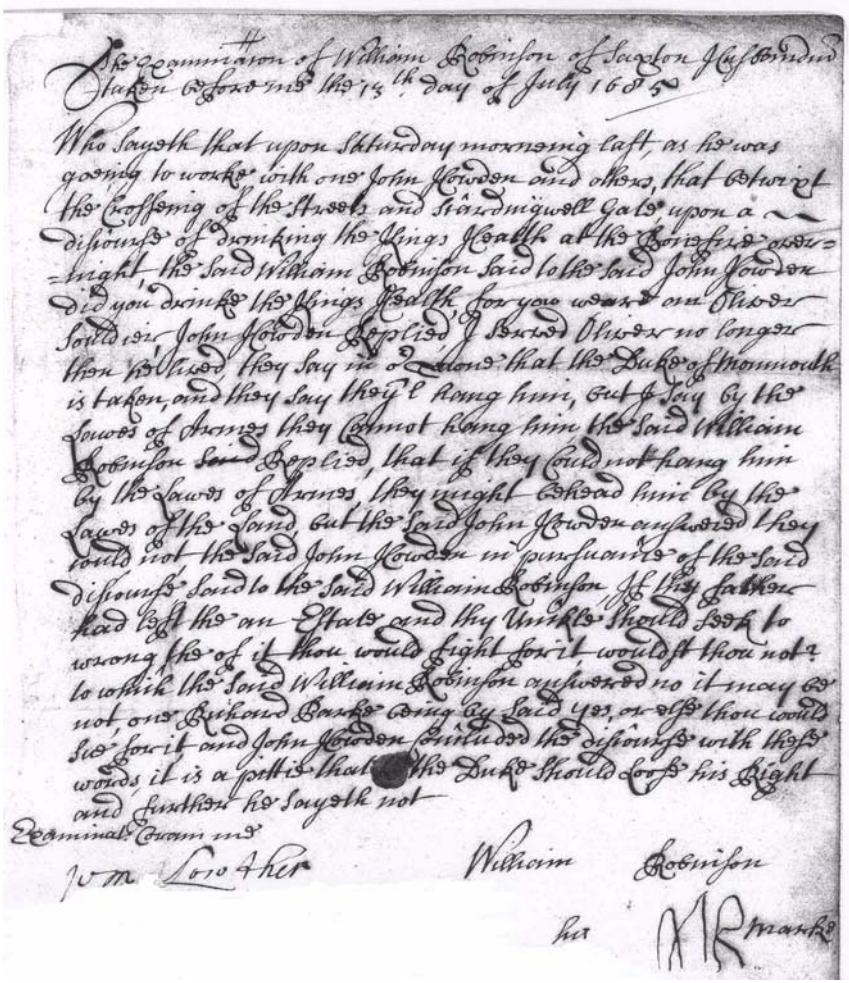
1 Introduction

1.1 Aim

The aim of this article is to introduce a three-year project to produce a text edition in electronic format of Early Modern English handwritten witness depositions.[1] In recent years, witness depositions have received increasing attention as a possible source of evidence of spoken interaction of the past. However, research based on depositions is made difficult by the dearth of editions of such material. Moreover, the few editions that exist are not completely reliable as sources for linguistic investigation (Kytö and Walker 2003). The goal of our edition is to make available a substantial number of depositions (c. 200,000–250,000 words) from different areas of England. The edition will render these texts in two formats: a transcription which reproduces as faithfully as possible the linguistic and visual characteristics of the manuscript text, and a version of the transcription which is adapted to facilitate computer searches. As well as notes on the texts and a selective glossary, the edition will include both a historical and a linguistic introduction, and an index of people featured in the depositions, together with sociohistorical data such as their age, occupation, etc. The project follows the recent call for more linguistically-oriented editions by e.g. Bailey (2004), Lass (2004), and Grund (2006). Such editions aim at reproducing the original manuscripts faithfully, and avoid normalizing, modernizing, or otherwise emending the original manuscript texts. This article will outline the background of our project in detail, describing what a deposition is, why our edition is needed, how we have collected our material, and how we are constructing our edition. We conclude with a brief case study of THOU and YOU in three regions of England to highlight the value of witness depositions as a source for linguistic research.

1.2 Depositions

A deposition is an eye-witness account that was given orally, usually prior to a criminal, civil, or ecclesiastical trial, and recorded in writing by a scribe. The deposition would then be read out aloud during the trial, where the witness could be called upon to answer follow-up questions (Cusack 1998: 92). Below is an example deposition, from Yorkshire in 1685. In the deposition, the deponent, William Robinson, is giving evidence against a fellow farmer, John Howden, who is accused of claiming that the Duke of Monmouth is the rightful King. Our transcription, example (1), reproduces the manuscript reading as faithfully as possible using modern typeface.[2]



(National Archives, London. Assizes, Northern Circuit, Criminal Depositions. MS ASSI45/14/2, f. 64r, the examination of William Robinson, 1685. Reproduced by kind permission of the National Archives)

(1) The Examinacon of William Robinson of Saxton Husbandm˜
taken before me the 13th day of July 1685 /

Who Sayeth that upon Saturday morneing last, as he was
goeing to worke with one John Howden and others, that betwixt
the Crosseing of the Streets and Scardingwell Gate, upon a
discourse of drinking the Kings Health at the Bonefire over-
night, the Said William Robinson Said to the Said John Howden
did you drinke the Kings Health, for you weare an Oliver
Souldier, John Howden Replied, I Served Oliver no longer
then he lived, they Say in o˜ Towne that the Duke of Monmouth
is taken, and they Say they'l hang him, but I Say by the
Lawes of Armes they Cannot hang him, the Said William
Robinson ~~Said~~ Replied, that if they Could not hang him
by the Lawes of Armes, they might behead him by the
Lawes of the Land, but the Said John Howden answered they
could not, the Said John Howden in pursuance of the Said
discourse, Said to the Said William Robinson, If thy father
had left the an Estate and thy Unckle Should Seek to
wrong the of it, thou would fight for it, wouldst thou not?
to which the Said William Robinson answered no it may be
not, one Richard Parke being by Said yes, or else thou would
Sue for it, and John Howden Concluded the discourse with these
words, it is a pittie that ~~he~~ the Duke Should Loose his Right
and further he Sayeth not

Examinat: Coram me
Wm Lowther William Robinson
his MR Marke

A deposition usually begins with a statement about the case (type of case, parties involved, etc.), followed by information on the witness, which may include data on the place of residence, age, profession, and relation to the parties of the court case. In the sixteenth century, this initial material is frequently in Latin, although single words (often the profession of the witness) may be in English. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this part is increasingly written in English in secular court cases, but the ecclesiastical court records (see section 2) tend to be more conservative in this respect.[3] The deposition proper presents the oral testimony of the witness as one narrative or several loosely-connected narratives. These narratives were commonly fuelled by specific questions (or *articles*), which in most cases have not survived. The scribe usually recorded the testimony in the third person (*he*, *she*, *the said* + name or *deponent*/*examinant*) and in the past tense. Legal formulae, most notably *the said* + name, are found throughout the narrative, though their frequency varies from scribe to scribe, as

does the frequency of short Latin phrases such as *ut recolit* ('as far as she/he remembers'). Of particular interest to the historical linguist is the fact that, when the witness cites an earlier speech event, this is quite often rendered as direct speech by the scribe (as may be seen in the example above). The speech reported may be that of the deponents themselves, but it may also be that of other participants at the speech event, sometimes giving several layers of reported speech (Culpeper and Kytö 1999: 174–181; Kytö and Walker 2003: 223; Grund, Kytö, and Rissanen 2004: 155).

It is difficult to verify whether a deposition is a reliable record of what was actually said, but there is some evidence to suggest that many of these records may be fairly reliable. For example, multiple depositions may report the same or similar wording, and dialectal glossing (whether the gloss is offered by the witness or the scribe) may indicate an attempt by the scribe to present a faithful account, in that the dialect words used by the witness are retained although the gloss itself should suffice (Kytö and Walker 2003: 226–228).

1.3 The need for a linguistic edition in electronic form

Since depositions can be used to obtain information about spoken interaction of periods for which we have no audio recordings, they have attracted a great deal of attention recently from scholars working on different languages (see e.g. Hope 1993; Culpeper and Kytö 1999; Walker 2003 and forthcoming [English English]; Collins 2001 [Russian]; Lönnroth 2002 [Swedish in Finland]; and Grund et al. forthcoming [early American English]). Depositions are also significant in that they contain sociohistorical information about the people involved, such as their age, rank, and marital status (as mentioned above), which allows researchers to correlate linguistic and sociohistorical variables. Moreover, in many Early Modern English texts, women play less of a role than men, but depositions are an exception: they offer eye-witness accounts by both men and women. In fact, historians have shown that women more often than men brought actions for defamation, which was a common cause in the ecclesiastical courts of the period (e.g. Sharpe 1980; Gowing 1996). Depositions also differ from many other genres in that those involved represent the entire spectrum of the social hierarchy, but especially the lower ranks. Thus depositions are useful for the study of differences between men and women, and those of different rank: they give us an excellent opportunity to investigate the relationship between language, gender, and society of the past.

Despite this increased interest, there are relatively few editions of English depositions; of these, two of the better-known editions are those by James Raine (1845) and Frederick Furnivall (1897). Moreover, some of the editions avail-

able, including the two just mentioned, are partly or wholly unreliable as linguistic material (Kytö and Walker 2003; Kytö and Walker 2006: 27–31): in addition to transcription errors, the language has sometimes been modernized, phrases or passages have been omitted, or Latin has been translated into English without any clear indication that the changes are editorial. Those interested in depositions have thus had to rely on the few and at times very problematic editions and/or consult the original manuscripts. Working with the original manuscripts may give more reliable results, but using the originals has obvious drawbacks. The manuscripts are not only scattered in archives all over England, but they are of course extremely time-consuming to transcribe. The inaccessibility of the material has also meant that it is difficult for other scholars to confirm or expand upon the findings of those using depositions as their data source.

To remedy this situation, our project will make a number of deposition collections from a variety of English regions more readily accessible to researchers. Our edition was in part inspired by Cusack (1998), which contains a chapter on depositions, and includes many of the features that we will adopt. As mentioned above, another important influence for our work has been the recent call among some linguists for 'linguistic' editions. Lass (2004), in particular, has argued that many of the editions which are used by historical linguists are unsuitable because they present normalized, modernized, or otherwise modified texts. Instead, he advocates a return to faithful transcriptions of the original manuscripts as linguistic sources (see also Bailey 2004; Grund 2006).

Our edition is also significantly different from previous editions in that it will be published in electronic format. There are obvious advantages in using this format: it will allow us to include more material than normally found in editions (see below), and we can also give information about, and reproduce characteristics of, the manuscripts. But perhaps the most important aspect is that an electronic edition will enable computer searches, making it easier for researchers to exploit the material. In essence, we are combining editorial work and corpus compilation into a new type of edition/corpus, which will undoubtedly be of great cross-disciplinary interest, offering valuable material for both linguists and historians.

2 Material

Our material comes from record offices and other archives across England. Part of it was collected for the project *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* in order to check the reliability of the printed editions used in that corpus (see Kytö and Walker 2006). (It was outside the scope of that project to transcribe manu-

script material.) As material containing direct speech was favoured for the corpus, the manuscripts collected during that project, and now being transcribed for our edition, tend to have a bias towards depositions containing direct speech. The occurrence of direct speech in the depositions has naturally also been a consideration when collecting further manuscript material for the edition.

The aim has been to collect depositions from four areas of England: the North, South, East, and West, complemented by depositions from London. The 200-year period, 1560–1760, has been divided into four shorter periods, i.e. the late sixteenth century, the early seventeenth century, the late seventeenth century, and the early eighteenth century. This period division emerged largely as a result of the distribution of the material that we have been able to obtain. In this way we have one deposition collection or more representing each area in each period.

Our material consists of two overarching types of depositions: depositions from ecclesiastical cases and depositions from criminal cases. In the Early Modern period, cases of slander, conflict over broken promises of marriage, wills and similar issues were dealt with by ecclesiastical courts. Cases relating to theft and murder, on the other hand, were the jurisdiction of criminal courts.

Map 1 shows the dioceses represented by deposition collections relating to ecclesiastical court cases. Map 2 shows the counties and/or towns represented by deposition collections relating to criminal cases. (The dioceses and counties are given in two different maps for clarity only, as these different types of administrative areas overlap geographically.) Material representing the West of England, from Somerset, and perhaps Devon, will be added later, and is therefore not yet included in the maps.

Table 1 shows the deposition collections, listed in chronological order. Some deposition collections may include a few texts which represent the previous period. For convenience, such collections are given in Table 1 under the period represented by the larger part of the collection. The material is generally found either in loose bundles, or bound in volumes, written by one or more scribes. Due to the large quantity of material, it is not usually feasible to transcribe a deposition collection in its entirety. We have instead attempted to take a representative sample of a collection. For practical reasons, and in the interest of linguistic research, we have tended to omit e.g. damaged manuscripts, testimony that consists of only one or two lines, testimony that was almost exclusively taken down in Latin, or testimony which consists only of a list of stolen items or a list of goods to be bequeathed. Where there are a number of depositions relating to the same case in a collection, we have attempted to include all, if possible. The general aim has been to transcribe 5,000 to 10,000 words from each collec-

tion. The ultimate goal is to produce a total of between 200,000 and 250,000 words of transcribed material, distributed fairly evenly across the periods and regions.

Map 1: Dioceses currently represented in the material (ecclesiastical court records)

Map 2: Counties and/or towns currently represented in the material (criminal case records)

Table 1: The deposition collections (in chronological order)

Period	Date	Title	Type of case	Region
1	1560–66	Norwich	C	East
(1560–1599)	1560–73	Durham	E	North
	1561–65	Chester	E	North
	1566–77	Winchester	E	South
	1577–91	Chelmsford	E	East
	1583	Norwich	C	East
	1591–93	London	E	Central
	—	*Somerset*	*E*	*West*
2	1600–02	Winchester	E	South
(1600–1649)	1609–15	Oxford	E	South
	1627	London	E	Central
	1627–37	Durham	E	North
	1645	Suffolk	C	East
	1646–49	Northern	C	North
	—	*Somerset*	*C*	*West*
3	1645–56	Chelmsford	C	East
(1650–1699)	1647–75	Colchester	C	East
	1653–99	Northern	C	North
	1667–79	Oxford	E	South
	1681	London	E	Central
	—	*Somerset*	*C*	*West*
4	1696–1760	Lancaster	C	North
(1700–1760)	1700–54	Norwich	C	East
	1714	London	E	Central
	1724–58	Northern	C	North
	1751	Oxfordshire	C	South
	—	*Somerset*	*C*	*West*

C = Criminal case(s); E = Ecclesiastical cases.
Italics indicate depositions not yet collected.

3 Transcription

3.1 First-round transcription

The first-round transcription is the base transcription, which is carefully checked and proofread against the manuscript. The preliminary transcription will serve as the basis for the two final versions of each deposition that will be included in the edition (see section 3.2): a 'readable' version, and a 'searchable' version.

To illustrate the transcription process, we have taken a deposition from Norwich in 1705/6, in which one of the city watchmen reports an attack on his colleague by a Mr Mingay. Example (2) is our first-round transcription of this deposition:

(2) The Informac@o@n@ of John Sparrow of Micl@l@
at thorne p%ish Taken vpon oath the 8=th=
day March 1705/6 before Peter Thacker Esq=~=
Maior of the City of Norwich &c=~=

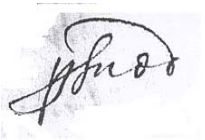
who saith that on the Last Tuesday at night about
twelve ^{(a Clock)} as he was goe in the ward being one of
the watch with one William Eady towards S=t= Johns
of Sepulcher Church, there in y=e= streett came two
men rideing and the said Wil@l@: Eady Call=d= too them
and asked who is there, they, answered & said
what need you Care, And then they were Charged in
the Queens name to stand, And the said Wil@l@. Eady
Tooke hold of the ~~said~~ horses Bridle that one ~~Huybbe~~
Huyby was on; & there was with him M=~= John
Mingay who Called out & said these are the Rogues
that onhorst Norfford on Satterday Last, & then
Lighted off his horse, & swore he would sacrafice
them ["him" amended to "them"], and p%sued after the said Eady, And he heard
the said Eady Cry out & said he have stabb me, And
Huyby Call=d= out to the said M=~= Mingay & said Brother
for Gods sake have a Care what you Doe, And he
further saith that the said John Mingay Rune after them
& swore he would run him Throw, And afterwards
said that nothing Greved him that he did not Kill
the Rogue ["R" written over "m"] And further he doe not say

Jurat Coram me John: Sparrow
Petro Thacker Maiore

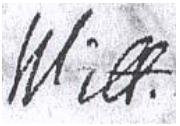
> (Norfolk Record Office, Norwich. Norwich Quarter Sessions files, interrogatories and depositions. MS NCR Case 12b(1), the information of John Sparrow, 1705/6)

Although many scholars have made attempts to create a universal set of principles for the transcription of manuscripts, no scheme has so far been wholly successful. Our first-round principles are eclectic, influenced by our previous experience of various transcription and corpus work (e.g. Grund 2004; Kytö and Walker 2006; Rosenthal et al. forthcoming). We have preserved manuscript lineation and punctuation in the transcription. Cancelled words are indicated by a single strikethrough. Text written above the line (or in the margin) in the manuscript is indicated in the transcription by the use of curly brackets. Corrections to the text by the scribe in the form of words or letters written over other words or letters are noted in our editorial comments, which are given in square brackets. Modernization is avoided, but where there is ambiguity in interpreting whether a letter is a capital or a minuscule, as for the letter 's' in this example transcription, we follow Present-day English practice.

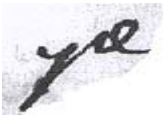
There are certain common abbreviations used in the documents, which are rendered in our first-round transcription using particular symbols. By way of illustration, we comment on the symbols found in the transcription above.



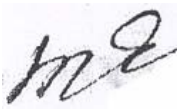
This is an abbreviation for *pursued*. The letter 'p' with a horizontal stroke through the descender or a line on the descender from the bottom up and across represents 'par', 'per', 'por', or 'pur', and is transcribed as 'p' followed by the percentage sign ('p%').



This is an abbreviation for *William*. Both macrons ('~') and lines over or through letters in a word to indicate missing letters are rendered with the *at*-sign ('@') after each letter so marked.



This is an abbreviation for *the* (i.e. "y^{e}"). Superscript is indicated by the use of the equals sign ('=') to surround the letters that were in superscript in the manuscript, a practice in line with the *Helsinki Corpus* project (see Kytö 1996).



This is an abbreviation for *Master.* Various flourishes on or after a letter are rendered with the letter followed by equals sign, macron, equals sign ("=~=").

3.2 The 'readable' and 'searchable' versions

The second step of our editorial work, which has not yet begun, is to convert the first-round transcriptions into two final versions of the depositions:

a. the 'readable' version: a transcription which is as close to the original text as is possible in electronic format.
b. the 'searchable' version: a version coded to facilitate searches.

The 'readable' version is illustrated by example (3a), an extract of the first-round transcription of the Norwich deposition (example 2 above) that has been edited for the 'readable' version.

(3a) [...] Eady Call^{d} too them
and asked who is there, they, answered & said
what need you Care, And then they were Charged in
the Queens name to stand, And the said Will. Eady
Tooke hold of the ~~said~~ horses Bridle that one ~~Huybbe~~
Huyby was on; & there was with him M$^{\sim}$ John
Mingay who Called out & said these are the Rogues
that onhorst Norfford on Satterday Last, & then
Lighted off his horse, [...]

For the 'readable' version, the equals signs indicating that the enclosed characters are in superscript will be automatically removed and the characters rendered in superscript. The *at*-sign will be automatically replaced by lines over the relevant characters, in order to more closely resemble the manuscript reading. The

goal of this version is to provide a text that is easily accessible to readers, a text that at the same time closely reflects the original manuscript.

Example (3b) is the same extract from the first-round transcription that has been edited for the 'searchable' version.

(3b) [...] Eady Call=d= too them
and asked$] who is there, [$they, answered & said$]
what need you Care, [$And then they were Charged in
the Queens name to stand, And the said Wil@l@. Eady
Tooke hold of the [§said§] horses Bridle that one [§Huybbe§]
Huyby was on; & there was with him M=~= John
Mingay who Called out & said$] these are the Rogues
that onhorst Norfford on Satterday Last, [$& then
Lighted off his horse, [...]

Calling this version 'searchable' may need some clarification, since the first version could also potentially be used for some searches of individual words or phrases. However, the superscript and certain characters used in the 'readable' version are not easily dealt with by search programmes. Therefore, in the computer searchable version, our use of the equals sign and the *at*-sign in the first-round transcription is maintained. Cancelled words, on the other hand, are indicated by the use of square brackets and the section sign. The most important aspect of the coding is that it will allow more fine-grained searches. Direct speech, for example, is distinguished by the use of dollar coding ('[$...$]') to enclose all text other than direct speech. Moreover, headings and foreign language (typically Latin formulae) will be marked off from the rest of the text. This coding follows principles used in the *Helsinki Corpus* and/or *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* (see Kytö 1996; Kytö and Walker 2006). Relevant material can thus be more easily found by the computer for those interested in spoken interaction, the mixing of English and Latin in depositions, and similar features.

4 Other features of the electronic edition

In addition to the two versions of each manuscript text, and a selection of scanned images of the material, the edition will contain a range of other features. We intend to include an index of those involved in the cases that the depositions pertain to (judges, witnesses, defendant, plaintiff, etc.), insofar as this information is easily retrievable. Much of the information is in fact available in the deposition texts themselves, such as the name, occupation, marital status, and age of the deponent, and sometimes other participants, as illustrated in example (4).

(4) R@o@b@t@u@s Skeale de hornchurche in com@ Essex husbandma=~= vbi moram fecit ab infantia sua et i@b@m@ oriund=~= etat¤[4] circiter xxiiij anno*rum*
[Robert Skeale of Hornchurch in the county of Essex, husbandman, where he has lived since infancy, and [he was] born in the same place, around 24 years of age] (our translation)
(Essex Record Office, Chelmsford. Archdeaconry of Essex Depositions. MS D/AE/D3, f. 3r, the testimony of Robert Skeale, 1586)

Further information can be gained from other sources, including contemporary printed reports on particular cases, and local histories by archivists and other researchers that are available from the county record offices. For example, the background to two cases from deposition collections in our edition, from the Diocese of Oxford in the early seventeenth century, and a murder case from Henley in Oxfordshire in 1751, is discussed in some detail in a publication by the County Archivist at Oxfordshire Record Office (see Boardman 2004). The index will thus enable the researcher to factor in socio-economic variables when the language of the depositions is investigated.

The language of the depositions is obviously constrained by a number of conventions of legal writing, e.g. Latin formulae, *the said + name*, and opening and closing formulae (see Grund et al. forthcoming). To help readers negotiate and take these conventions into consideration in linguistic studies, we will provide a short introduction to depositions as a genre, highlighting genre-specific characteristics (see also section 1.2), and the historical context in which they were written. The introduction will also include a description of different aspects of the manuscripts such as scribal hands, layout, etc. Scribal hands are particularly important since the scribes are a shaping force behind the texts. Some of the collections are written by one scribe exclusively, while others show several scribes at work. Scribal variation is thus yet another influence on linguistic variation found in the depositions.

Finally, we will supply the transcriptions with explanatory notes on the text as applicable, and a selective glossary of e.g. legal terms or archaic and dialectal words found in the depositions. The explanatory notes will mostly be used to explain complicated syntax, or possible errors, which may obscure the meaning of a passage. For instance, in the following example, the final two words “for me” could also be read as “forme”, i.e. *form* (meaning ‘way to behave’). Both readings are possible as the scribe frequently switches between indirect and direct speech in this deposition and word division is often unclear. As shown in example (5), in our edition we have opted for “for me” as the most likely reading, but the alternative will be discussed in an explanatory note.

(5) [...] M=~= Thomas ["Thomas" written over "John"] Pooll of Elland did send a man
to tell this Informant she might goe to the sign of the
shears in Elland to speak to the Landlady, & make
nobody acquainted with it & it would be better for me;
(National Archives, London. Assizes, Northern Circuit, Criminal Depositions. MS ASSI45/18/2, f. 47r, the examination of Elizabeth Benton, 1724)

The glossary fulfils a similar function, helping the reader negotiate the texts. Examples of dialectal or obsolete words that may cause problems are: "gart" = 'yard, garden' (*OED* s.v. *garth* n^1), "skailde" = 'dispersed, scattered' (*OED* s.v. *skail* v.), "hynd" = 'servant, farm servant' (*OED* s.v. *hind* n^2), "stroyde" = 'destroyed' (*OED* s.v. *stroy*), "hall howse" = 'the principal living-room in a farm-house' (*OED* s.v. *hall-house*).

5 Case study regarding regional variation

To illustrate the potential value of the material for linguistic research, we have selected a feature that has been shown to vary according to region, i.e. second person singular pronoun usage, THOU vs. YOU (see e.g. Walker forthcoming for Early Modern English, and Upton and Widdowson 1996: 66–67 for Present-day English).[5] The decline of THOU is a well-known phenomenon in the history of English: in very general terms, YOU increasingly encroached upon THOU in the sixteenth century, was becoming predominant by the seventeenth century, and had relegated THOU to dialects and special registers by the eighteenth century (see e.g. Barber 1997). We chose to look at the period 1700–1760: although THOU has been found to be all but obsolete after 1700 in genres reflecting "standard English" (see e.g. Barber 1997), Walker (forthcoming) demonstrates that it continues to occur with some frequency in depositions. We have taken three early eighteenth-century deposition collections, and compared the frequency of THOU in relation to YOU. The collections are especially comparable in that they consist of depositions taken in criminal cases. All three collections were sampled from loose bundles, and pertain to a number of different cases. In all three collections, the cases relate to assault, theft, and the like, and primarily involve people from the lower walks of life (artisans, labourers, etc) in some sort of conflict. Usually those involved are neighbours or acquaintances.

Table 2: The distribution of THOU and YOU singular in three early eighteenth-century deposition collections

Region	**THOU**	**YOU**
North-east (1696–1760)	30 39%	47 61%
North-west (1724–1758)	30 35%	56 65%
East (1700–1754)	0	55 100%

Two things may be noted in Table 2: first, the similarity in pronoun distribution between the North-eastern and the North-western collections, and, second, the great difference between these and the collection from the East. The former gives some support for our decision to group the North-east and the North-west into one region (North). The latter suggests a dialectal difference between the East, where THOU is not found in the material, and the North. This is particularly interesting as the North is an area where THOU may still occur in the dialect(s) today (Upton and Widdowson 1996: 66–67). The difference in distribution is statistically significant (χ^2 = 28,272, p <0.001, df = 2). The following extracts show examples of different pronoun usage in dialogues which are otherwise similar in terms of variables such as situational context, sex, age, and social status; hence difference in region seems a likely motivating factor behind the difference in pronoun choice. Walker (forthcoming) illustrates that THOU was typically found in angry or intimate exchanges in depositions from a variety of regions in the late sixteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, according to the material used in the present study, this usage is limited to the North, as illustrated in examples (6a)–(8b):

(6a)–(6b): two examples of angry accusations by a male commoner addressing a female commoner:

(6a) [...] said he, Thou knows y=t= y=u= and thy Daughter
Murthered a man, and conveyed him away.
(North-west: National Archives, London. Palatinate of Lancaster, Crown Court Depositions. MS PL 27/2, the information of Thomas Airton, 1697)

(6b) [...] the said Bassett said Damm
ye for a whore you have pict my Pockett
(East: Norfolk Record Office, Norwich. Norwich Quarter Sessions files, interrogatories and depositions. MS NCR Case 12b(2), the information of Ellen Wakefeild, 1714)

(7a)–(7b): two examples of intimate address by one male commoner to another:

(7a) [...] and said to this Informant my Dear
Sam I would have thee look after me for I am afraid I am
wounded
(North-west: National Archives, London. Palatinate of Lancaster, Crown Court Depositions. MS PL 27/2, the information of Samuel Baxtonden, 1697)

(7b) [...] & Butler Said
: my : dear : Soul you do not Love me half So well as I
: do : you, hugging him at the Same time
(East: Norfolk Record Office, Norwich. Norwich Quarter Sessions files: interrogatories and depositions. MS NCR Case 12b(2), the information of Richard Willson, 1739)

(8a)–(8b): two examples of angry address by one male commoner to another:

(8a) [...] the first thing he saw was
that Rycroft had Sharp by the Collor and shook him & ~~bid him~~ {s=<d>= Dam the}
hold thy ["thy" written over "his"] Tounge or ~~he wo=d=~~ {I'll} make the ["the" written over "him"]
(North-east: National Archives, London. Assizes, Northern Circuit, Criminal Depositions. MS ASSI45/26/1, f. 115r (2), the testimony of George Anderson, 1757)

(8b) [...] Sam@=l@l@= Tuttill who is now pres=t=
Came & took hold of Richardsons Coat & Shoved him
ag=t= the Wall & Said Damn you What do you want
(East: Norfolk Record Office, Norwich. Norwich Quarter Sessions files: interrogatories and depositions. MS NCR Case 12b(2), the testimony of John Wakeman, Samuel Richardson and William Fox, 1752)

Of course, the evidence of dialectal variation in this case study is not conclusive: we need to take other variables, especially speaker/addressee rank, into account when analysing the data. However, this study shows that the material offers interesting possibilities for further research, especially when more material covering more areas is added.

6 Conclusion

Our electronic edition will surpass printed editions: it will be larger, more accessible, more flexible, and more faithful to the original manuscript. From a linguistic perspective, the edition will offer valuable and easily accessible material in electronic form, especially to those interested in the relationship between linguistic features and different extralinguistic factors (such as sex, age, socio-economic status, and region). The detailed index will also be of great help in this regard. In addition, the material is also highly relevant for historians. The value of depositions for research into Early Modern English society has already been shown in several studies (e.g. Ingram 1987; Gowing 1996). The volume and range of material in the edition clearly makes it valuable for diachronic and other comparative studies from a historical perspective.

Notes

1. We gratefully acknowledge the funding of this project by the Swedish Research Council (Dnr. 421-2004-1310).
2. In the transcription, lines, macrons, and other marks over letters in the manuscript which indicate missing letters are all rendered as lines over the letters; flourishes on or above a letter in the manuscript which indicate abbreviation are rendered as '~' after the letter.
3. Naturally, there are depositions that are written exclusively in Latin. We have not considered those, as our project is specifically concerned with depositions that are primarily written in English.
4. This symbol is used to represent the abbreviation used in the manuscript at the end of words to indicate 'vowel + s'.
5. THOU comprises all the forms *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, *thyself*, and YOU includes the forms *ye*, *you*, *your*, *yours*, *yourself*.

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