

**14th National Conference of the History of English
Florence, 22-24 January 2009**

CONFERENCE REPORT

by
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The 14th edition of the National Conference of the History of English (SLIN 14) was hosted by the Department of Modern Philology and by the Department of Linguistics in the historic and artistic town of Florence.

Even though the Conference was held in midwinter, the convenors were provided with unexpected relatively mild weather, not too chilly and not particularly damp for a town developing around such an important river as the Arno.

The first day of the conference felt like a family reunion, with warm and friendly greetings, even though the presence of scholars of international relevance granted the high academic quality of the event. However, the absence of two of the historical members of the SLIN group was deeply and regretfully felt by the other participants. Richard Dury (Bergamo) and Nicola Pantaleo (Bari) could not attend the meeting, but they were certainly present in the minds and souls of each member of the SLIN group.

After the traditional welcoming address by the local organisers and the University representatives, **Ingrid Tieken Boon van Ostade** (Leiden) gave the first plenary lecture, entitled *Communicative competence and the language of 18th-century letter-writers*. The lecture followed the conference theme of 'The language of private and public communication in a historical perspective', dealing, in particular, with the correspondence between two eighteenth-century fellow members of the Church, Robert Lowth (1710-1787) and William Warburton (1698-1779), in order to demonstrate how the authors' communicative competence was transmitted and how their language was adapted according to the situation, the topic of the letter and the relationship between addressees. Moreover, the paper demonstrated such methodological issues as the importance of considering idiolects in historical linguistic studies, especially when dealing with epistolary material.

After the plenary, the first to read their contribution were **Giovanni Iamartino** and **Angela Andreani** (Milan), who presented *In the Queen's name: the writings of Elizabeth I between public and private communication*. This study analysed the writings of (or attributed to) Queen Elizabeth I. The material analysed is by no means easy to examine for various reasons, well described by the two scholars. The difficulty of studying this material lies mainly in the heterogeneity of the material itself, in the manuscripts containing these documents which are many and not all well preserved and, finally, in the writings themselves which are described as co-productions with various scribes, so that it is not always easy to distinguish Queen Elizabeth's from her scribes' contribution. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the authors examined the material from a linguistic and stylistic perspective, in order to separate not only the Queen's voice from her scribes' but also to differentiate documents meant for public communication from those having a private purpose, seeing how her style changes accordingly.

Koichi Kano (Tokyo), instead, inquired into *Phonetic Spellings in the XVIIIth-Century Private Correspondence in Norfolk*. The paper examined the correspondence of three Norfolk people during the 17th century, investigating, in particular, the spelling variants they contain in order to extract some information on the pronunciation of the time. The issues studied involved the analysis of vowel quality, such as the phenomena of vowel raising and diphthongisation, as well as of consonantal features, such as the devoicing process or the presence of doubled consonants which might signal the existence of a short vowel.

The third paper of the morning session was given by **Paola Tornaghi** (Milan-Bicocca). Her paper *Antiquarians sharing information and knowledge in the XVII century* focussed on the analysis of a small corpus of correspondence exchanged between Sir William Dugdale and other antiquarians, considering in particular those letters containing information on Anglo-Saxon scholarly history. The analysis of such material enabled the author to demonstrate how the correspondents were particularly keen on retrieving Anglo-Saxon lexical heritage, especially through the compilation of glossaries and dictionaries, and also how they would exchange information on historical material as well as personal ideas.

After lunch, the first to present was **Alessandra Levorato** (Florence) with a contribution on *Keywords, collocations and ideology: an analysis of the Castlereagh Act of Union correspondence in its political context*. The paper studied the correspondence exchanged over a time span of three years, between September 1798 and July 1801, between various political and religious figures supporting the union between Ireland and Britain. The main purpose of the contribution was, in fact, to examine the linguistic and extra-linguistic features contained in the letters in order to observe the use of lexical and grammatical features used by the correspondents to convey in the most persuasive way their ideological positions.

The second paper was given by **Marina Dossena** (Bergamo) and entitled “*We beg to suggest*” – *Features of legal English in Late Modern business letters*. The aim of the paper was to examine elements of legal language present in business letters dating from the 19th century. The material taken into consideration is part of the wider Corpus of Nineteenth-century Scottish Correspondence, in preparation with Richard Dury at the University of Bergamo. In particular, Dossena examined the presence of legal English in non-highly-specialised contexts, especially as far as vocabulary and pragmatic strategies are concerned. Some conclusive remarks show that the primary concern of the business letters was the success of the business transaction, but the material showed also different strategies adopted especially when legal discourse was presented in generic contexts, for example when one of the correspondents was more expert than the other.

The second afternoon session, after coffee break, started with **Daniela Cesiri**'s (Salento) presentation entitled *Address forms in Victorian 'royal' letters: between public and private communication*. The contribution sought to study address forms in official letter-writing at the highest ranks of Victorian society, in particular the correspondence between Queen Victoria and her prime ministers. In particular, the paper examined the expression of social power and political influence contained in the letters. The preliminary results of this study showed that if, on the one hand, the correspondence between the sovereign and the prime ministers contained highly codified address forms, on the other hand more private correspondence, among the prime ministers themselves and with other peers, contained more flexible and variable address forms which changed according to the personal relationships between correspondents, but also according to the topic of the letters.

The second paper entitled “*What a story is this?*”: *witness narratives in seventeenth century courtroom discourse* was presented by **Elisabetta Cecconi** (Florence). The author examined long narrative answers produced by witnesses in 17th-century trial proceedings, analysing in particular their structure and functions. The focus of the paper was mainly on the manifestation of the witnesses’ linguistic and pragmatic incompetence, which if it appears as a disturbing element in the narrative, it also reveals the witnesses’ anxiety and low socio-cultural level. Indeed, the paper showed how the analysis of the witness narrative style could give information about the social power of the witnesses themselves.

The last paper of the day was read by **Selena Sampson** (Ohio State University), enquiring into *The Role of Text Type in Early Modern English Gradable Adjective Variation*. The study offered an analysis of comparative and superlative adjective variation based on the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English, comprising texts dating from 1500-1710. Considering correlations between text type, word length and also text date, the author noticed that the Early Modern period was a phase of relatively stable variation. The paper also stressed the importance of linguistic and extralinguistic variables which can contribute to create the combination of features pertaining to each text type.

The day ended with the traditional SLIN workshop, presided by Maurizio Gotti (Bergamo) who kindly accepted to substitute Nicola Pantaleo. During the workshop, the members of the SLIN group discussed the state of the proceedings of the previous SLIN conferences and Susan Kermas (Salento) presented the volume of the Proceedings of the 13th SLIN Conference held in Lecce in 2007, announcing that the volume had just been published by Edizioni Del Grifo (Lecce) and was edited by Maurizio Gotti and herself. Moreover, the group happily accepted the proposal of the University of Cagliari of hosting in 2011 the 15th National Conference of the History of English (SLIN 15). The local organisers communicated also that an English publishing house was interested in publishing a volume specifically focussed on the theme of the conference, a piece of news gladly welcomed by all the convenors.

The second day of the conference started with the second plenary lecture given by **Laura Wright** (Cambridge). The paper entitled *Shops and Shopping in Eighteenth-Century London: Non-Standard Language as Evidenced by Footmen, Coachmen and Shopkeepers’ Bills* dealt with features of public communication, in particular with morphological and phonological features of non-standard London English. The material examined consisted of tradesmen’s and servants’ bills which were used to list the traded goods and to advertise the commercial activity, especially by means of pictures that could attract the illiterate customers’ attention. In particular, the paper examined lexical, morphological and phonological information contained in the bills issued by either shopkeepers or servants. Through evidence taken from original bills displayed to the audience, the author showed how these bills contain useful information about the non-standard speech of the upper working classes in eighteenth-century London.

The morning paper session started with **Roberta Mullini** (Urbino) and her contribution “*Gull’d by the enchanting tongues of Quack and Zany*”: *the rhetoric of nostrum marketing in speech and print in the English renaissance*. The paper examined the language of early medicine contained in such forms of medicine advertising as handbills and pamphlets which were very popular during the Early Modern period. In particular, what was examined were the rhetorical strategies used to sell remedies by ‘self-promoting quacks’. Particular emphasis was put on the relationship between written and oral discourse. Various text types were examined in support of the

author's claim, including theatre and street dramas and non-literary texts produced in early modern England.

The second paper was read by **Udo Fries** (Zurich) and entitled *English Newspapers in 1701*. This presentation described linguistic and stylistic differences in newspapers issued in London at the turn of the 18th century. The texts analysed were taken from the ZEN Corpus which comprises English newspapers from 1671 to 1791. The author sought in particular to mark a distinction between quality newspapers and popular ones with the final aim of enquiring into the possibility of tracing a linguistic profile to be attributed to single newspapers.

After coffee break, the next slot of papers began with **Birte Bös** (Rostock) who talked about *Personal perspectives – on the functions of first-person quotation in British news reports*. The paper dealt with the results emerged from a research on the Rostock Newspaper corpus, which includes news reports from 1700 to the present. In particular, the author enquired into the function of first-person quotations as stylistic devices, seen as a means through which a writer could influence his audience, as well as strategies to reduce to a minimum the distance between the writer himself and his readers.

Next in the session was **Francesca Benucci** (Florence) whose paper was entitled *Creating a corpus of English Civil War Newsbooks*. The aim of the paper was to introduce a project called Florence Early English Newspaper Corpus, still under compilation and, as a second point, it examined the linguistic and ideological issues provided by the texts contained in the corpus. In particular, Benucci outlined the collocational patterns of some particular keywords present in these text types.

The following paper was presented by **Gabriella Mazzon** and **Geoffrey Gray** (Cagliari) who dealt with *Persuasive discourse and language planning in Ireland*. Even though the paper looked much more as a work-in-progress project, the two authors presented the complex history of language planning adopted in Ireland since the arrival of the English settlers. By analysing documents of the time, the paper looked at some discursive strategies which show that some stereotypes were deliberately created to gain consent on the English domination in Ireland.

The last paper of the session was presented by **Antonio Bertacca** (Pisa) who analysed *Charles Darwin's Red Notebook (1836-1837)*. The famous scientist's notebook contains records of Darwin's scientific thought as well as important clues on the development of the theory of natural selection. Bertacca analysed the notebook from a linguistic perspective in order to analyse possible implicit meanings which can give new insights into Darwin's reasoning. In particular, what was stressed in this paper was the close connection between the explicit language used by Darwin and the implicit meaning which lies behind the surface text.

The afternoon session started with **Gabriella Di Martino's** (Naples, Federico II) paper entitled *Lady Blessington in Naples from 1823 to 1826*. In this presentation, the author sought to enquire into the linguistic features present in documents written by English noblewomen who spent long periods in Naples. As a case study, Di Martino introduced the figure of Margaret Power, Lady Blessington, a beautiful and witty Irish writer, who spent three years of her life in Naples. The text taken into consideration is a travel diary written by the lady, a textual typology which usually contains also conversational features. For this reason, Di Martino investigated the language used in this text in order to see how she expressed her deep involvement with the town and its people.

Massimo Sturiale (Catania) followed a similar theme. Indeed, his paper *Language and Myth: The Representation(s) of Sicily in Early Modern English Travelogues* described the linguistic strategies used during the 16th and the 17th to depict the Mediterranean island of Sicily. Examining

English travelogues of the period, Sturiale highlighted also the 'halo' of myth which surrounded Sicily in the eyes of English travellers. However, the author detected some temporal differences in these descriptions: if the first accounts presented the island through anecdotes and under the light of classical mythology, later descriptions present some stereotyped elements typical of travel literature.

Alicia Rodríguez-Álvarez (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), instead, focussed her attention on *Mechanisms to render the meaning of the Spanish element in Early Modern English travel books*. This contribution analysed travel books dealing with explorations in South America: they were written by English adventurers and published during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. In particular, they played an essential role in the spreading of Spanish forms into the English language. The author, then, analysed the different strategies used by the writers to render these Spanish words or expressions understandable to the wider public in England.

The last session of the conference started with **John Denton's** (Florence) paper entitled '*Hail Mary' Goes Underground: from public to private Catholic discourse in Early Modern England*. The paper analysed Catholic devotional texts published in English during the sixteenth century, taking into particular consideration the religious discourse which passed from the public to the private domain. The linguistic choices and the rhetorical strategies used in this changing situation were analysed also in light of the predominant protestant tradition.

Next, **Alice Spencer** (Turin) presented her contribution *Etymology, Genealogy and Hagiographical Auctoritas in Bokenham's Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. The author wanted to demonstrate that the fifteenth-century poet's concern about etymologies and genealogies was coherent with the modest tone and the plain style he used in his poetry to avoid individualistic vanity contrary to God's moral.

The next paper, "*A simple and popular description*": *the Natural History Rambles of J. G. Wood*, was given by **Eleonora Chiavetta** (Palermo). This contribution described the communicative strategies and rhetorical devices used by Rev. John G. Wood to transmit scientific popularised knowledge during the 19th century. Chiavetta underlined, in particular, the dual approach taken by Wood: if on the one hand he refused to use traditional and scientific phraseology and nomenclature referring to the popular names attributed to flora and fauna, on the other he used features typical of specialised discourse. This contradictory approach could be explained considering Rev. Wood's goals which were to describe English wildlife in simple language and to give information on how to cultivate the plants he illustrated.

The final day of the conference ended with **Thomas Christiansen** (Salento) who read a paper entitled *The evolution of a distinct Australian lexis as seen in popular nineteenth century bush ballads and spoken verse*. This last contribution analysed the formation of a distinct Australian variety of English through the examination of popular spoken verse, the so-called bush ballads, and other types of literature having Australia, its people and its language as their main theme. Christiansen analysed in particular the lexis contained in these texts in order to map its evolution from the use of dialect words 'imported' from the British Isles to the creation of original Australian terms and passing through the use of aboriginal words.

The Conference Dinner held in a restaurant serving typical Tuscan cuisine was the perfect occasion for Giovanni Iamartino's traditional speech and for remembering once again the two missing members who were missing in person but not from the hearts of each of the friends gathered there. One of the many toasts included the much deserved compliments to the local

organisers, Gabriella Del Lungo, Nicholas Browless, John Denton and their team of assistants, who made the conference such a pleasant and thought-stimulating event.

After an exquisite, plentiful and lavish dinner the company parted, only to meet the following day, when John Denton guided though Florence historical city centre a small group of participants, who bravely bore the rainy and cold weather which at last made its appearance.