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Grapho-phonological parsing of C15 Scots: a reassessment of the [v]~[f] alternation

This paper introduces a new technique for analysing variant spellings in non-standard writing systems. We take evidence for devoicing of /v/ in C15 Scots as our case study.

Following loss of final -e in early Middle English (ME), /v/ (the restructured allophone of intervocalic /f/) was subject to word-final devoicing in northern varieties (Mossé 1952: §45, Fisiak 1968: 61). According to Johnston (1997: 104), devoicing of final /v/ is widespread also in Scots and can be traced back to early forms in final <f(f)>, e.g. C15 Scots *gif(f)* 'give', *haf(f)* 'have', *luf(f)* 'love'. This, then, raises questions about the signification of <f(f)> in *giffyn* 'giving', *haffand* 'having', *luffit* 'loved': did /v/ also devoice intervocalically in early Scots, or do these forms show levelling of devoiced /v/ to stem-final position (cf. Bermúdez-Otero, 2007: 503), or are they simply historic root spellings carried over from Old English? And what about *gafe* 'gave', *haf(f)e* 'have', *lufe* 'love'? Do these show that final <e> had no phonic substance? And what of text languages in which <f(f)> (presumably for [f]) and <u, v, w> (presumably for [v]) alternate in the same environment, e.g. *hafe* ~ *have*?

Such questions lie at the heart of a major study of the phonological origins of Scots. The project, *From Inglis to Scots: Mapping sounds to spellings*, takes a systematic approach to the relationship between sounds and spellings through a new technique of grapho-phonological parsing. This involves (i) triangulating early Scots spelling units (= graphemes, *litterae*), their corresponding sound values (= phones, *potestates*), and the *potestates* of the varieties which were the immediate inputs to Scots; (ii) annotating these correspondence sets with etymological, phonotactic and syllable-position information. From these analyses we derive for our case study a list of matches, i.e. tokens of <f(f)> for historical [f] or <u, v, w> for historical [v], and of mismatches, e.g. tokens of <f(f)> for historical [v] or <u, v, w> for historical [f]. We show how our annotations enable us to discover the linguistic circumstances in which these (mis)matches occur and thereby offer a comprehensive analysis of early Scots <f(f)> and <u, v, w>.

Our data is drawn from LAOS, which represents 1,400 local documents written in 1380–1500 Scots. There has been no systematic investigation of (de)voicing in Scots in this period, and our findings are relevant for understanding the situation in late northern ME, if not early northern ME as well.

References

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