

Daniela Landert. 2024. *Methods in historical corpus pragmatics: Epistemic stance in Early Modern English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 332 pp. ISBN 978-1-009-23741-3 (Hardback).

Review

Jeremy J. Smith*

University of Glasgow, Great Britain

Over the last thirty years, the historical study of language – like many areas of enquiry – has been completely transformed through technological innovation, viz. the appearance not only of large electronic corpora, variously annotated, and large databases, but also of new tools for their analysis. As readers of *ICAME Journal* will be well aware, for Anglicists much of the pioneering work in this space was undertaken at the University of Helsinki; the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*, a diachronic multi-genre electronic corpus, first appeared in 1991 (with several updatings since), and was later complemented by numerous sub-corpora and other related projects. Other institutions rapidly followed suit, and Helsinki's unit for the study of variation and change in English (VARIENG) currently offers a curated set of links through their *Corpus Resource Database* (CoRD),¹ including many with historical content. All such materials and tools, many publicly available, have opened up – and continue to open up – remarkable new research possibilities. These approaches have since become ubiquitous across the research landscape internationally, to such an extent that it is now hard to conceive of any serious scholarship in historical linguistics being pursued without reference to such resources and tools.

One effect of these developments has been the dominance in many quarters of quantitative approaches to data-analysis, comparable to that undertaken in (e.g.) sociolinguistic research into present-day usage. It is certainly true that such work can “[provide] the empirical basis for observations that otherwise would be ungrounded impressionism” (Crystal 2021: xv), but there are difficulties for historical linguists. For obvious reasons, direct access to the spoken mode of language for any period before the very end of the nineteenth century is not available; and those written records from the past that have come down to us require careful interrogation about their socio-cultural contexts, often very complex or even irrecoverable.

Questioning of this kind was always a strength of the philological tradition and has been encouraged by the increasing salience in scholarly discourse of philology's offspring, historical pragmatics: the application of pragmatic approaches to the written materials surviving from the past. Historical pragmatics offers functional explanations for the linguistic forms found in texts, in which “context play[s] a ... prominent role” (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2013: 43). As a result, most scholars now accept that quantitative analysis has to be balanced with careful qualitative research before robust conclusions can be drawn from the evidence provided by these “witnesses”.

¹ <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/CoRD/#:~:text=CoRD%20is%20an%20open-access%20online%20resource%20through%20which,Unit%20for%20Variation%2C%20Contacts%20and%20Change%20in%20English>, last consulted 18 January 2025.

* Corresponding author: Jeremy J. Smith, E-mail: Jeremy.Smith@glasgow.ac.uk

Open Access. © 2025 Jeremy J. Smith, published by Sciendo.

 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.

Such a balancing-act can however be extraordinarily time-consuming, and thus frustrating. As the late Angus McIntosh once opined to the present reviewer, “It is astonishing sometimes in our work how much effort has to be exerted for a depressingly small yield.” Daniela Landert’s excellent new monograph addresses this challenge directly. Its goal is to show how the new resources available to historians of English can be used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the latter being pursued in a more timely fashion than has been achievable hitherto.

The book is primarily – as its title suggests – methodological in orientation. It demonstrates how a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in the analysis of epistemic stance – defined here (p. 3) as “the expression of attitudes concerning the degree of certainty and reliability of information” – in a wide selection of Early Modern English (EModE) texts from a variety of genres. These texts derive mostly from a selection of currently available corpora: the *Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* (CED), the *Early Modern English Medical Texts* corpus (EMEMT), the *Lampeter Corpus of Early English Tracts* (LC), and the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (PCEEC). Many EModE authors characteristically liked – in ways that sometimes seem to present-day readers rather excessive – to deploy formulations such as *Truly I do think*, *I know full well*, *Verily I say* across their texts. Daniela Landert has observed that such usages tend to cluster together in particular passages in these texts that can be identified and then subjected to close analysis. Using both previous research and new “big-data” tools such as the *Historical Thesaurus of English* (linked to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), but iteratively through careful examination of individual textual particularities, it is now possible in ways not available to earlier investigators to identify systematically a set of datable words and phrases of this kind, and to demonstrate in detail how they function. Landert argues that explanations for these patterns of usage relate closely to contextual factors in the broadest sense, including not only language-internal developments such as changes in the expression of modality but also larger questions of socio-cultural function in relation to text-type.

The book is divided into three main sections, each further subdivided into chapters. Part I consists of theoretical orientation, outlining the challenges currently faced by those practising historical corpus pragmatics, and then focusing on key issues for the study of stance. Part II turns from theory to method, discussing how stance markers can be identified and retrieved from corpora, despite the differences in how corpora have been compiled. This section includes a valuable inventory of frequently occurring markers of epistemic stance in EModE. In Part III four empirical studies are offered, with close analysis of passages where such markers cluster (i.e. “high-density”). The author shows how stance markers reflect both wider cultural shifts and the backgrounds of language users; she also shows the value of corpus methodologies, when allied with manual analysis of “data-rich” passages. This section concludes with in-depth studies of the markers *I say* and *I tell (you)*, and of certainty markers (e.g. *Yes*, *truly*) in three EModE genres where certainty is not a default stance, i.e. political pamphlets, medical treatises and trial proceedings. The book ends with a summarising conclusion and a set of helpful appendices.

Daniela Landert’s monograph is an important piece of original research, beautifully organised and carefully expressed, with significant implications for how research in historical pragmatics can be pursued in the future. As I have already flagged, its primary aims are methodological, and it offers many valuable practical insights, such as how to handle the different practices of compilation and annotation adopted in the production of corpora: practices that – as many researchers can surely attest – can sometimes impede rather than assist further investigation. The book also offers really valuable theoretical orientation, both on the special topic of epistemic stance and on wider issues in historical corpus pragmatics. I have certainly learned a great deal from it and can recommend it wholeheartedly.

I should however like to conclude this review with a suggestion about where such research might go. Landert set out with the intention of harnessing theory and offering fruitful methodological directions, and in these tasks she has certainly succeeded. She also offers some really insightful – if necessarily short – analyses of individual EModE texts, and if I had a criticism of the book it is that I should have liked to see these even further developed. I much enjoyed, for instance, the discussion (pp. 201–205) of passages such as the following, from the letters of Dorothy Osborne (1627–1695) to her future husband, the diplomat William Temple (1628–1699). This famous correspondence dates from the period of their

courtship – in the face of the opposition of both sets of parents – during the aftermath of the English civil war. Here is one of the passages analysed by Landert, from a letter dated to 1654. Osborne and Temple were to be married at the end of the year, but when these words were written Osborne had “temporarily lost faith in the success of their relationship” (p. 205). Stance expressions are indicated by italics.

You doe not thank mee for useing your Rivall soe scurvily nor are not Jealoux of him though *your father thinks* my intentions were not handsom towards you, which *my thinks is another Argument* that one is not to bee on's owne Judge, for *I am very confident* they were, and with his favour *shall never beleeeve Otherwise; I am sure* I had noe End's to serve of my owne in what I did, it could bee noe advantage to mee that had firmly resolved never to marry, but *I thought it might* bee an Injury to you to keep you in Expectation of what was *never likely to bee as I apprehended*;

In this passage, Osborne deploys stance expressions with aplomb to distinguish her own position from that of Temple's father (*your father thinks*), while she uses certainty markers such as *I am very confident* to align herself with Temple himself. The sequence of past tense stance markers at the end of the passage (*I thought it might, never likely ... I apprehended*) shows Osborne distancing herself from her earlier position.

Understanding how such passages work requires, it will be evident, the harnessing of research from a variety of disciplines. However, such insights also have something to contribute to those other disciplines; as Vaclav Brezina has put it, corpus linguistics “can help us discover and elucidate patterns and tendencies in the data that might otherwise remain hidden” (2018: 5). “Interdisciplinarity” has been so frequently applauded by senior managers of academic institutions that many researchers have tended to become cynical about the term, but such a reaction – though understandable – seems to this reviewer to be mistaken. Historical pragmatics has shown itself over the years to be a capacious discipline, open to engagement with fields ranging from theology through history and literary criticism to medicine and politics, with much to say to – as well as learn from – them. Reaching out to such disciplines is a task for which Daniela Landert is, on the basis of this impressive volume, well suited, and it will be exciting to see the future direction of her research.

References

- Brezina, Vaclav. 2018. *Statistics in corpus linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Crystal, David. 2021. Foreword. In Valerie Hobbs, *An introduction to religious language*, xiv–xv. London: Bloomsbury.
 Jucker, Andreas & Irma Taavitsainen. 2013. *English historical pragmatics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.