The role of Dutch in the development of East Anglian English

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Abstract

Dutch speakers may or may not have contributed a certain amount of lexical material to modern East Anglian dialects. There is a much stronger case to be made, however, for arguing that Dutch speakers did have a rather profound influence on the morphology of East Anglian English, dating from the time when almost forty percent of the population of the capital of East Anglia, Norwich, were refugees from the Low Countries. That influence was indirect, and mediated through mechanisms of linguistic change associated with language contact.

Key words: Dutch, Norwich, immigrants, language contact, dialect contact, simplification, third-person singular zero

1. Introduction

Today, the greater urban area of the city of Norwich in eastern England has a population of about 250,000, and is of a medium size compared to other cities in the country. In mediaeval times, however, and up until the 18th century, Norwich was the largest city in England apart from London, with the possible exception from time to time of Bristol and York. Green & Young (1964) cite a population figure for Norwich in 1662 of 29,200 and say that "Norwich was then probably the largest provincial town in England".

2.   Dutch in Norwich

Even eight decades earlier, in 1579, the population of Norwich had been as high as 16,236; the focus of this paper is on the remarkable fact that, of that sixteen-odd thousand, approximately 6,000 were immigrants. Only just over 60% of the population of the city in the last quarter of the 16th century were native-speakers of English.

The large immigrant community, which formed well over one third of the population of Norwich, was comprised of the largest settlement of Flemish and Walloon Protestant refugees anywhere in England. They had fled across the North Sea from the Low Countries to escape from Spanish persecution which, under the Duke of Alba, had been gradually increasing from 1567 onwards. The Spanish overlords there had executed many prominent people, confiscated estates, and ruthlessly suppressed any opposition to their rule; and there was considerable persecution of Protestants.

These Norwich refugees were following in the footsteps of a slightly earlier and much smaller group of immigrants from the Low Countries who had come by invitation. In 1565, the mayor and aldermen of Norwich had asked 30 "Dutchmen" and their families to settle in Norwich. These newcomers were weavers and other textile workers who were invited because it was felt that the economically highly important Norwich textile industry had been lagging behind in terms of technology, design and skills. These "Dutchmen" were in fact 24 Flemish and 10 Walloon master textile workers who, it was hoped, would help to modernise the industry in the city (Rickwood, 1984; Vane, 1984).

The newer and much bigger wave of refugees were themselves also predominantly textile workers, but they also included ministers, doctors, teachers, merchants and craftsmen. Our interest here, however, lies in the fact that these 6,000 or so incomers were native speakers of Dutch (Flemish) and, to a lesser extent, French (Walloon). They came mostly from Flanders and Brabant, but there were also many Walloons from Armentieres, Namur and Valenciennes (which at this period lay north of the border with France), plus some German speakers from Lorraine.

It is attested that this sudden influx of refugees caused very considerable overcrowding. It could hardly be otherwise. The population of the city had, after all, increased by about 60% in a rather short space of time. The very high proportion in the city of foreigners – "Strangers" as they were called in Early Modern English – did lead to a certain amount of inter-communal friction, and there was at least one attempted revolt against them; but generally the absorption of a very large number of refugees into the population

was relatively problem-free, perhaps because the economic benefits of the reinvigorated textile trade were eventually rather obvious.

Thus large numbers of English speakers, Dutch speakers, and French speakers found themselves living in very close proximity to one another: Norwich at the turn of the 16th century was the scene of very considerable language contact indeed. And this situation must have continued for many generations. The Dutch and French languages survived in Norwich for many decades before complete language shift to English took place. Moens, for example, (1888) writes that "in the first half of the 17th century, as much Dutch and French was spoken in Norwich as English". That would seem to be something of an exaggeration, given that the Strangers were always outnumbered by the indigenous anglophone majority. But the first books ever to be printed in Norwich were in Dutch and, as Joby (2012) has described, many documents from the period, written in Dutch, are preserved today in the Norfolk Record Office. Official orders for the conduct of the "Strangers" in Norwich were also written in French in 1659.

Eventually, "slowly but inevitably the Strangers became merged into the surrounding population and the community lost its separate identity" (Ketton-Cremer 1957). By 1742 the congregations attending church services in Dutch and French were apparently small, and their churches in poor shape. And although church services in Dutch and French continued for much longer than that, it appears that they gradually became simply liturgical languages which no one spoke in their everyday lives, although the church services do suggest that some sense of a separate ethnic identity had been preserved.

The best interpretation of the language shift process would seem to be that the Dutch and French languages, having arrived in Norwich in the period 1565-1570, finally died out of use as native languages in the city some time during the 1700s. This suggests that Norwich was a significantly trilingual city for 150-200 years or so, maybe six to eight generations. If this was the case, then it is highly likely that during this period a good number of people from indigenous Norwich families acquired the ability to speak Dutch (even if not French), as happened elsewhere in England (Joby, forthcoming), not least because of intermarriage and trading activities.

3.   Language Contact: Lexis

From a sociolinguistic perspective, we can note that language contact studies show that long-term, community-wide language contact of this type,

lasting for several generations, can often have linguistic consequences. If the demography and other sociolinguistic conditions are right (Trudgill, 2011), a large minority language, while subject in the end to language shift to the majority language, can leave some linguistic traces behind as substratum effects. One might expect, therefore, to see some signs of the influence of Dutch – and perhaps even French – on the local dialect of Norwich and its region. But what is the evidence? Can we locate any traces of such a substratum effect?

The truth would appear to be that these many generations of language contact have left behind very little influence on the local English. And there is really no surprise here, because of the particular conditions which obtained. Well over one-third of the population of Norwich may have been native speakers of languages other than English. But, as I have written in Trudgill (2011), the linguistic consequences of language contact depend very much on the sociolinguistic nature of that contact. It is in fact absolutely no surprise if the kind of scenario that we witness in Norwich from, say, 1570-1750 leaves few or no traces. After all, in a situation where a continuous native-speaker tradition is maintained (Thomason & Kaufmann 1988), why would there be any consequences?

In situations where native speakers transmit their language from one generation to another in the normal way, without interruption, the fact that there may also be non-natives around who are speaking second-language versions of the language will normally have no effect on this transmission whatsoever. It would be no surprise if the English spoken by native speakers of Flemish and Walloon was simplified and otherwise influenced by their native languages – undoubtedly it was. And if the demography is right, natives can and will accommodate, to different extents, to non-natives. But in 17th-century Norwich the demography was not right. The natives were always in a majority, and there was no intergenerational break in transmission between parents and children.

As far as the actual linguistic data is concerned, it has been argued that the Walloons, the French-speaking Strangers, are responsible for the local dialect word *lucam* 'attic window', assumed to be from the French *lucarne* 'skylight, garret window' (Trudgill, 2003). The English Dialect Dictionary (EDD) does confirm that this item is specifically a Norfolk and Suffolk word. And it is particularly relevant that the word refers to the type of long windows in the upper storeys of buildings that weavers used to sit and work at, in order to get the best light. On the other hand, the same word in the form of *lucarne* appears in most English language dictionaries, and is therefore not necessarily entirely East Anglian. In any case, no other

examples of Walloon influence on East Anglian English have been proposed, to my knowledge.

If we now turn to Dutch/Flemish, we can note that, while the lexical contribution of Dutch to Standard English is nothing like that of French, it is reasonably well established as being of some importance. The loan words involved tend to fall into a limited number of distinct semantic fields. It is not surprising, given the maritime trading connections between the Low Countries and Britain, that there are numerous words of nautical origin:

bluff, boom, buoy, cruise, deck, dock, drill, freebooter, iceberg, keelhaul, leak, morass, pump, skipper, sloop, smack, smelt, smuggle, yacht.

There are other words which are probably or possibly trade related:

to bluff, brandy, bundle.

There are a few, later words having to do with painting:

etch, easel, landscape, sketch,

and others of no particular provenance:

cackle, frolic, grab, offal, roster, skate, slurp.

The additional and particular influence of Dutch/Flemish vocabulary on the English of Norwich is harder to determine, for the obvious reason that Dutch and English are closely related languages, both descended from West Germanic. Resemblances between Dutch and forms of English are therefore most usually due not to the influence of Dutch on English, or vice versa, but to their common origin. Nevertheless, when we find English words that resemble Dutch and that are found *only or mainly* in East Anglia, then it is worth considering, first, whether or not they derive from close contact across the North Sea: Pettersson (1994) has shown that there are more words of Dutch and/or Low German origin in English dialects than in Standard English, as revealed by her study of the Survey of English Dialects materials, and that the areas with the largest number of such words are Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Essex. She suggests that "this is natural since the Dutch came across the North Sea and primarily settled in the areas in which they first landed". A second possibility is that they originated from the Flemish speakers who arrived with the Norman conquest, or

from the Flemish weavers who arrived in the 14th century. And the final and most likely possibility is that they derive from the massive numbers of Dutch-speaking Strangers who arrived in Norwich in the 16th century. In this scenario, the geolinguistic assumption would be that Dutch words which first arrived in Norwich then diffused, in the familiar pattern of the diffusion of linguistic innovations outwards from urban central places, to cover much or all of the area dominated by Norwich as the main urban centre, namely East Anglia.

One phenomenon which is widely accepted as being the result of language contact between Norfolk English and the Dutch of the Strangers is the presence in Norwich and other Norfolk towns of open areas which are not called *squares*, as they would be elsewhere, but *plains*. This seems rather uncontroversially to have come from Dutch *plein*: in Norwich there is Bank Plain, St Andrews Plain, St George's Plain, St Giles Plain and several more. This naming tradition is continued to the present day, albeit somewhat self-consciously, in new-build areas in the city.

Other Norfolk dialect words which have been suggested (Trudgill, 2003) as being of Dutch origin include the following:

> *Dwile* 'floorcloth' seems rather obviously to come from Dutch *dweil,* which has the same meaning. The EDD shows this word as being confined to the dialects of Norfolk and Suffolk, apart from one reference to Cambridgeshire.

> *Crowd* 'to push, as of a wheelbarrow or bicycle' may very likely have come from Dutch *kruien* 'to push a wheelbarrow'. The EDD, which also refers to pushing 'as of a wheelbarrow', as in "just crowd that barrer here", once again has references almost exclusively from Norfolk and Suffolk.

But other East Anglian words (Trudgill, 2003) which have been suggested as being due to 17th-century Norwich Dutch are much more doubtful:

> *Deek*, meaning 'dyke, ditch', could be from Dutch *dijk.* It is shown in the EDD as a variant of *dike*, but it is given as occurring in Lincolnshire and Kent as well as East Anglia. This makes it less like to be a loan due to the Flemish Strangers.

> *Fye out* 'clean up' may be connected to Dutch *vegen* 'to sweep'. *Fye* is purely East Anglian, according to the EDD, but a problem for the Flemish-origin hypothesis is that the EDD lists a similar form *fay* or *feigh* which occurred

very widely with a similar meaning in 19th-century dialects in many other parts of England.

Foisty 'mouldy, musty' is basically the same word as *fusty*, and may derive from Dutch *fust* 'cask'; but this is also the same word as French *fût,* Old French *fust.* The EDD has no entry for this word.

Dwainy 'weak, sickly.' There was an Old English word *dwinan* meaning 'to waste away' which became *to dwine* in Middle English. This form survived in regional dialects in many parts of the country (see EDD), and survives in English generally in the form of *dwindle*. But the form *dwain(y)* is, according to the EDD, confined to Norfolk and Suffolk and may perhaps be from, or influenced by, a related early Dutch word *dwijnen* 'to vanish'.

Hake 'hook over a cooking fire, pothook' may possibly also be Dutch. The word *hook* derives from Old English *hoc* 'hook'. *Hake*, on the other hand, comes from the related Old Norse word *haki*, also meaning 'hook', and/or from the Dutch word for 'hook' *haak*. According to the EDD, the 'hook over a cooking fire' meaning is confined to Norfolk and Suffolk.

4.   Language Contact: Morphology

It has to be conceded, then, that, as predicted above, the Dutch and French languages of the Strangers have left hardly any traces on the dialects of East Anglia. However, there is another, more fundamental feature of the East Anglian dialect which, I argue, actually is the result of French and Dutch linguistic influence, although in a much more indirect way. And the reason why, against all sociolinguistic expectations, this influence did take effect requires more detailed sociolinguistic analysis.

The feature concerns present-tense verb forms. "Third-person singular zero" (Trudgill, 1974) is a well-known feature of the traditional dialects of Norfolk, Suffolk and northern Essex (Trudgill, 1990). In these dialects, forms such as the following are usual:

she like it very much
he do that very well
that taste very nice.

In Norfolk and Suffolk, at least, the feature also continues to be very much a feature of modern dialects. The publications of the Survey of English Dialects show zero-marking of third-person singulars in northern Essex, all of Suffolk, and all of Norfolk except the Fens (Trudgill, 1990; 2001).

Many other dialects of English demonstrate exactly the same phenomenon but, interestingly, they are all spoken outside the British Isles. It is well known that African American English in the United States has this feature, as do the English-based creoles and post-creoles of the Caribbean and West Africa. Other varieties of which this is true include the South Pacific pidgin and creole varieties Tok Pisin, Bislama, and Solomon Island Pidgin; the language spoken on Pitcairn and its sister language on Norfolk Island; and the English of Saint Helena.

What all these non-British Isles varieties have in common is that they share a history of considerable language contact. Their speakers are all descended from forebears who learnt English as a second language. Third-person zero is also found in the institutionalised basilectal second-language varieties of Singapore, Malaya, and elsewhere, where it is the speakers themselves who have learnt English as a second language. Adult language contact is well known to lead to simplification and regularisation (Trudgill, 2011), and loss of this irregular *-s* in these varieties is therefore not surprising. But how do we explain the regularisation that occurred in East Anglian English, as the only British Isles variety which demonstrates third-person singular zero? The fact that East Anglian dialects share this grammatical feature with the overseas contact varieties does throw up a possibility: can it be that East Anglian third-person singular zero is also a contact feature?

To investigate this possibility, we have to examine the chronology of the development of this East Anglian verb form. Up until to the 15th century, East Anglian English shared the fully inflected present-tense verb systems of other southern Middle English dialects; and the Paston letters, written in colloquial style by natives of the county of Norfolk, show consistent usage of third-person *-th* up until 1509. As is well known, this ending was found throughout the south of England, while the ending in the North was *-(e)s*. Then, for reasons that are not too well understood, the originally northern form began to spread southwards. Baugh and Cable (1993) claim that the spread of *-es* forms to the south is "difficult to account for, since it is not easy to see how the Northern dialect, where they were normal, could have exerted so important an influence on the language of London and the South". Immigration is one obvious possibility.

The spread was gradual geographically and socially. The northern innovation affected lower-class and colloquial speech first, and we know

that in London there was a long period when there was variability. It is often pointed out that Shakespeare was able to use both *-th* and *-s* forms to indicate social status of speakers, but also to help meet the needs of poetic metre. According to Baugh and Cable, *-s* forms predominated in the London area by 1600, and the diffusion continued from there: forms in *-th* still occurred in the Traditional Dialects of Devon and Cornwall until the early years of the 20th century (Wakelin, 1972).

As far as East Anglia is concerned, we can assume that the new *-s* forms arrived in Norwich also before 1600. But there is evidence that zero has been the norm since at least 1700. The Rev. R. Forby, who was born c. 1732 and died in 1825, set out in his posthumous book (1830) to describe the East Anglian dialect "as it existed in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century", i.e. from 1780-1800, so his very oldest speakers would have been born around 1710. He wrote: "we so stubbornly maintain that the first and third persons are of the very same forms 'I love, he love'" (1830: 142). And in fact it is probable that the -Ø ending was typical of Norfolk English well before that: a number of zero forms occur in the colloquial Norfolk correspondence of Katherine Paston written in the period 1603-1627 (Hughey 1941).

If we then want to consider a contact-based explanation for why modern East Anglian dialects have zero, then we must consider what sociolinguistic factors were operative in the two hundred year period between approximately 1510, when the Paston letters show *-th* in Norfolk, and 1710, when Forby shows that -Ø had established itself in local Norfolk speech rather than the *-s* which had taken over in London. And we have already noted a sociolinguistically very important event which happened during precisely that period: the arrival of the Strangers in the capital of East Anglia. This suggests rather strongly that third-person singular zero in East Anglia is no different in origin from the same grammatical feature in Englishes elsewhere in the world.

We can argue that East Anglian third-person singular present-tense zero is a contact feature which developed as a result of the presence in Norwich of large numbers of non-native speakers of English who, in using the language as a lingua franca amongst themselves and with the native population, failed to master, as non-native speakers often do, the irregular person-marking system of English verbs. This feature then spread out from Norwich as the dominant central place, in the well-known pattern of the geographical diffusion of linguistic innovations (see Trudgill 1983: 57-87), until it covered the whole area of East Anglia.

There is, however, a serious problem with this hypothesis to do with the fact, as asserted above, that the sociolinguistic scenario was not right

for significant substratum effects to occur. And why would this language contact situation result in the simplification of the present-tense verb system when it had no other grammatical consequences, and hardly any lexical consequences either, as we have seen?

The most important explanatory factor for this development in East Anglia was precisely the timing of the arrival of the Strangers in Norwich (Trudgill, 1996). At all times, as we have seen, in spite of the large numbers of foreigners in the city, native speakers outnumbered non-natives by at least two to one. It is therefore apparent that, under normal circumstances, the zero form would never have won out. Circumstances were not normal, however. The point is that the Strangers arrived in Norwich from the Low Countries at more or less the same time as the new *-s* form arrived from the Midlands of England via London. It was in a situation of three-way competition between the older *-th* form, the newer *-s* form and the foreigners' zero form that the typologically simpler *-Ø* was successful, leading to the situation that we find in the dialect today. That is, the immigrants arrived exactly at the time when the present-tense verb system was in a state of flux in Norwich, with considerable variability between *-th* and *-s* forms. In other words, at any other time in history, competition between minority non-native zero forms and majority native forms with third-person marking would *not* have led to the replacement of native by non-native forms.

In the late 16th century, however, competition was not between zero and a single native form. On the contrary, competition was between *-Ø* and *-th* and *-s*. This was a much more equal competition, and one in which the non-native form had the advantage of linguistic naturalness and simplicity. And as far as this feature was concerned, the non-natives were not outnumbered 2-to-1. The English of the native population was variable in usage between *-s* and *-th* endings, and there must have been a crucial decade or so when each of the three forms was employed by approximately one-third of the population, with the indigenous citizens divided half and half as to their usage of the older and newer forms. The originally non-native form then eventually won out, because of its linguistic naturalness and regularity.

5.   Conclusion

I suggest, then, that Dutch speakers had a really rather profound influence on East Anglian English, even if the Dutch language itself did not. The explanation for the absence of third-person singular *-s* in East Anglian English is similar to the explanation for its absence from other varieties,

including African American English. The explanation lies in language contact. The very large minority of Flemish and Walloon non-native speakers of English may have had very little lexical influence on Norwich. But they did, indirectly, have an influence with much more fundamental grammatical consequences.

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