

Gender paradox and prescriptivism in 18th-century England based on The Bluestocking Society

The aim of the presentation is to consider the potential influence of prescriptivism on some of the (morpho)syntactic rules in letters written by women in the 18th century. The main source of data is the digitized correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu and Mary Hamilton, members of The Bluestocking Society. The two informants were active in the period when the prescriptivism movement was gaining motion in England.

Among the most common issues, the 18th-century grammarians were debating over double negation (e.g. I didn't eat nothing), double adjective comparison (e.g. more hander, the most slowest), and preposition stranding (e.g. She was the person I was speaking of). These features attracted considerable interest that seemed to surge over the course of the century (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1982: 283, Bax 2008: 287, Yáñez-Bouza 2008: 275). While researchers in the field of historical sociolinguists have previously subjected the three syntactic structures to scrutiny, to date an analyses of the three of them together have not been undertaken based on private female correspondence of the time.

The paper presents 5 selected grammarians of both sexes who weighed on the discussed grammatical issues (James Greenwood (1711), Ann Fisher (1754), Rober Lowth (1763), Dorothea Du Bois (1772), and Ellen Devis (1777)) . A quantitative analysis of letters authored by Elizabeth Montagu (ca. 240 letters written between 1738 and 1790) and Mary Hamilton (ca. 150 letters written between 1776 and 1814) retrieved from The Mary Hamilton Papers (1743-1826) project and The Bluestocking Corpus: Private Correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu, 1730s-1780s project is presented in the empirical part. All instances of double negation, double comparative/superlative, and preposition stranding were extracted manually (additionally, the instances of comparatives/superlatives have been checked in Lancsbox and quantified against the potential instances of non-occurrences). The results were analysed qualitatively against the degree to which women's adhered to the rising prescriptivism movement and discussed in relation to gender paradox, which assumes that "women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed but conform less than men when they are not" (Labov 2001: 293)".

Keywords: prescriptivism, gender paradox, women writers, historical linguistics

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