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### **On the retarded rate of development of early American English: Evidence from verbal morphology with ablaut verbs in focus**

The present paper aims at checking if the alleged conservatism of early American English (Kytö 1993), presupposing that the early colonists nurtured the older usage longer than their British contemporaries (and the language of the colonists was susceptible to adopting the innovative trends more slowly than the language of their contemporaries who remained in the mother country), holds true in the case of verbal morphology. More specifically, the paper focuses on the class of ablaut verbs where the ‘relic’ preterit forms in <a> or <i> (for instance, *brake*, *spake*, *writ*) compete with the ones in <o> (*broke*, *spoke*, and *wrote*) in the course of the period under scrutiny. The choice of this particular group is by no means accidental, for the supposed temporal slow-down of the language progress in the early Colonies might manifest itself in the rivalry of variant forms of this class of verbs.

Since it is worthwhile to compare American English with the language of the mother country synchronically and observe the converging or diverging trends of development occurring among verbs at issue, the results obtained from the corpus of early American texts are compared with the ones attested in the British corpus tailored as a supplementary collection aiming to parallel the American material.

Finally, the data for ‘relic’ forms yielded from both corpora are supplemented with the results for the rivalry of the third person singular endings (–s and –th) in early American and British English obtained by Kytö (1993) and Dylewski (2003).

As for the periodization adopted in the present study, the time span embracing the years 1620-1720 has been chosen since it represents the initial stage in the development of American English which witnessed the process of shaping the colonial language by such factors as migration, isolation, as well as socio-demographic conditions. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the initial settler period was more or less over.

In order to trace both short-term and long-term linguistic developments the century in question has been further subdivided into the following sub-periods 1620-1660, 1662-1692, and 1700-1720. Such extralinguistic factors as the main historical events, changes in settlement patterns as well as major transformations in the social climate and living conditions serve as landmarks distinguishing the aforesaid subdivision.

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