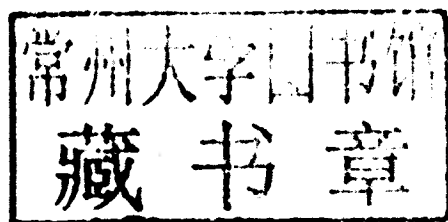


# **The Language of Queen Elizabeth I: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Royal Style and Identity**

Mel Evans

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Dr Mel Evans  
*University of Birmingham*

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library, London
CED	Corpus of English Dialogues
CEEC	Corpus of Early English Correspondence
EModE	Early Modern English
HC	Helsinki Corpus
LALME	A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English
LModE	Late Modern English
ME	Middle English
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
OE	Old English
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
PCEEC	Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence
PDE	Present Day English
PostA	Post-accession period (1559–1603)
PreA	Pre-accession period (1544–1558)
QEIC	Queen Elizabeth I Corpus
QEISC	Queen Elizabeth I Spelling Corpus
VARIENG	Research Unit for Variation, Contacts and Change in English (University of Helsinki)

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# PART I

## INTRODUCTION

The life and reign of Queen Elizabeth I are an enduring focal point of scholarly and popular interest. As a Tudor queen, Elizabeth represented and opposed the norms of her age, with her biographical make-up (social status, gender, education and life-experiences) a contradictory combination in Tudor society. The conflicts that eschewed throughout her reign, and beyond, as well as the various attempts at resolution, echo across the Early Modern political, cultural and literary domains (Montrose 2002). Elizabeth's position and her actions as queen were the preserve of all to discuss and evaluate; as Elizabeth herself once commented: 'We Princes, I tell you, are set on stages' (May 2004a: 65). Posthumously, the queen's 'afterlife', as Helen Hackett (2009) terms it, has been similarly rich and multifaceted. Such is Elizabeth's appeal to modern audiences that her life is being repeatedly re-told and re-imagined, whether through fictionalised biographies, cinematic portrayals, or rather more comic interpretations as seen in BBC television's *Blackadder*.

However, the iconic status of Elizabeth and her reign creates problems for researchers who wish to investigate the queen's social identity and improve our understanding of her experiences and sense of self when located in such a unique and contradictory social position. The image of Elizabeth that survives in public consciousness today is a symbolic representation, constructed from 'a composite of texts' (Frye 1993: 7), a complex tapestry of historical evidence derived indiscriminately from fact, myth and memory. Any study that attempts to engage with Elizabeth rather than her legacy therefore needs to carefully determine the authenticity and origin of the material used for analysis. Viewed this way, the best surviving material for such an investigation is the writing of Elizabeth herself. Surviving in the archives of sixteenth-century English manuscripts are the queen's letters, speeches, translations, and shorter works including prayers and poetry, written throughout her life. The manuscripts, many of them autograph (i.e. surviving in the queen's own hand), are the best record of the queen's actions and engagement with her social contemporaries in their social context. Each text captures particular moments, specific social experiences, and preferred communicative acts. Significantly, these archival materials, as well as being the material remains of historical moments in Elizabeth's life, also (necessarily) capture and document the *language* of the queen herself.

These documents—the words and writings of Elizabeth I—are the focus of the present investigation.

More specifically, the approach expounded here is that the language of these texts represents the queen's IDIOLECT. The idiolect is a long-standing concept in SOCIOLINGUISTIC research. Bloch (1948: 7) offers an early (if not the earliest) linguistic definition of idiolect as 'the totality of the possible utterances of one speaker at one time in using a language to interact with one other speaker'. He goes on (1948: 7) to specify three points:

- (a) that an idiolect is peculiar to one speaker;
- (b) that a given speaker may have different idiolects at successive stages of his career; and
- (c) that he may have two or more different idiolects at the same time.

Whilst introductory textbooks continue to acknowledge the concept (e.g. Wardhaugh 2010), the value of the idiolect for the study of linguistic variation and change has not been fully explored, and even less in the study of historical periods of a language. However, I propose here that approaching the writings of Elizabeth using a linguistic framework, specifically the principles and methods of VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS, will allow a new perspective on the queen by exploring the relationship between her language use and her social background. It should be noted that the present discussion modifies Bloch's definition, in order to treat the idiolect as a (singular) linguistic system specific to an individual. Rather than possessing a 'number' of idiolects a speaker, such as Elizabeth, modifies their idiolect for particular purposes.

My approach suggests that different aspects of Elizabeth's idiolect—both in their variation and consistency—will reflect and constitute the different components of her social identity: her rank, education, age, location, social contacts, experiences and relationships. The idiolectal data, it is hoped, will capture the intersection between social identity and linguistic meaning, and thus offer a new window from which to perceive and understand Elizabeth's sociolinguistic position in sixteenth-century society.

## 1. HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS

HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS, the study of historical language using sociolinguistic principles, is not conventionally associated with idiolectal analysis. As the youthful sibling to the more developed field of variationist sociolinguistics, the central aim has been to provide insight into 'the social embedding of real-time language change' by drawing on the diachronic span of historical data and investigating the correlation between linguistic variation and different social categories, such as age, gender, social status or region (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (henceforth N&R-B) 2003: 11).

Historical sociolinguistics and sociolinguistics subscribe to the premise that linguistic variation can lead to language change, but that the mechanisms are both linguistic and social. Sociolinguistics posits that linguistic variants, which occur naturally in the process of human communication, can acquire a socially significant meaning. Once socially marked, the variant diffuses across linguistic contexts and the speech community, gaining acceptance within a community's repertoire and leading to language change.

The role of the individual speaker in accounts of language change is typically subsumed into mass social categories. Modern studies have attempted to justify this approach by noting that most speakers conform to the linguistic behaviour of the social group(s) with which they wish to affiliate, thus legitimising their treatment as speakers (plural) rather than as linguistically-independent, idiosyncratic individuals (Bayley 2002: 122).<sup>1</sup> The role of the individual in language change has also been downplayed because of the perception that an idiolect captures only a synchronic perspective of the language system (Romaine 1982: 246). Yet, there is a growing recognition that language change does occur, and can be captured and studied, within the lifetime of an individual. Whilst a number of contemporary panel studies are ongoing (e.g. Nahkola & Saanilahti 2004; Sankoff & Blondeau 2007), the necessary duration of real-time investigations means that the results will take years to be fully realised. Historical sociolinguistics, on the other hand, has no such limitations. Linguistic data from decades, even whole lifetimes, of individuals can be collated, assessed and explored, although historical data carries with it its own set of methodological challenges; see, for example, Raumolin-Brunberg (2005) and Nevalainen, Raumolin-Brunberg & Mannila (2011).

The hypothetical correlation between a speaker's social experiences and their language use is a central concept for the analysis of Elizabeth's idiolect. The patterns identified in her idiolect, and the degree of similarity between these patterns and particular social groups, could provide new information about Elizabeth I as a speaker and a social being. The analysis is orientated around three research questions that structure the following discussion:

- Does Elizabeth's idiolect change in response to her accession?
- Can a sociolinguistic analysis of Elizabeth's idiolect provide a useful means for assessing authorship?
- What can idiolectal analysis contribute to historical sociolinguistics?

The study is divided into three parts. In the remainder of the present section, I discuss the theoretical principles and existing studies that inform

<sup>1</sup> This account does recognise elements of individuation in language use such as intonation, but, as they have little social significance, considers them insignificant (Chambers 2003: 93; cf. Podesva 2007). See Milroy (2003) for a critique of the marginalised role of the speaker in linguistics more generally.

the three research questions, provide an overview of the data forming the main and comparative sources for the investigation, and summarise the methodology that will be used to interrogate this data. Part II presents the findings for ten linguistic features in Elizabeth I's idiolect, and Part III discusses and evaluates these findings in relation to each research question, identifying their implications for future work on historical idiolects, Early Modern English, and the sociolinguistic approach to language variation and change.

### *1.2 Research Question 1: Does Elizabeth's idiolect change in response to her accession?*

Elizabeth's accession is consistently used by historians as a divide in Elizabeth's biography, separating her life into a 'before' and 'after' sequence of events. The division appears to have been largely accepted without criticism, with accounts repeatedly conceptualising Elizabeth's pre-accession (PreA) and post-accession (PostA) experiences as two, almost distinct, periods. For example, some works focus exclusively on Elizabeth's pre-accession life. The account of Thomas Heywood (1632) details 'the processe of her time from the Cradle to the Crowne', and the focus on Elizabeth's pre-accession life is also found in more recent publications, including Plowden (1971) and Starkey (2000). Elsewhere, some biographers disregard Elizabeth's pre-accession biography almost entirely. E.S. Beesly (1892) spends 235 pages exploring Elizabeth's reign, and grants the preceding 26 years of Elizabeth's 'early life (1533–1559)' a mere five pages. A number of biographies, of course, account for both periods in Elizabeth's life, particularly scholarly works such as Somerset (1991) and Perry (1990). Yet there is still a general sense of before and after that structures these reports, with the implication that Elizabeth's accession was a significant biographical event.

If the conceptualisation of Elizabeth's accession as a key moment in her biography is justified, then we might expect this event to have a noticeable impact on her language. Her accession certainly appears to have borne some influence upon her handwriting, at least, with the pre- and post-accession documents possessing notably different letterforms and levels of legibility (see Woudhuysen 2007 for a detailed discussion). However, whilst the emphasis placed on Elizabeth's accession is perhaps justified in a broad historical sense, it is unclear if there is a comparable impact at the idiolectal/biographical level. It may be that, in a life so rich and varied as Elizabeth's, there are other, more significant biographic experiences that have a greater affect on, and hence are more evident in, her idiolect. The diachronic analysis needs therefore to be sensitive to other potential links between patterns in her linguistic preferences and the socio-historical context.

In order to properly contextualise and interpret the idiolectal data, it is important to understand Elizabeth's experiences in both sub-periods. Fortunately, her life is well documented, and the following account offers a brief summary of the key biographical points most relevant to my analysis in Parts II and III. For a fuller account, I encourage the reader to consult Somerset (1991) and Perry (1990) in the first instance.

David Starkey (2000) describes Elizabeth's pre-accession life as an apprenticeship, a mildly hagiographical description that encapsulates the period's connection to, and distinction from, her later life as Queen of England. As part of her apprenticeship, Elizabeth experienced the privileges that came of being the daughter of a King. One clear benefit was her education. This began when she was aged only three or four, and its depth and breadth set her apart from many of her contemporaries in the mid-sixteenth century. The goal was not to prepare Elizabeth for the demands of sovereignty which, at this point, was an improbable occurrence given the birth of her brother Prince Edward, but rather to make the princess 'as learned as possible' (Somerset 1991: 15). Her early tutelage was largely a female-led affair. Her governess Kat Ashley reputedly taught her letters, the conventions and procedures of Tudor social etiquette, and Latin and Greek until 1542 (Borman 2009: 78).<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth's household also played an important role more generally in her formative years, her staff treating 'their young mistress with a mixture of parental indulgence and dominance' and providing her with 'emotional and political support' (McIntosh 2008: para.29).

From the mid-1540s onwards, Elizabeth's education was passed into the hands of male scholars affiliated with the universities: Dr. Richard Cox, Sir John Cheke, William Grindal and Roger Ascham. From this time, Elizabeth also came into consistent contact with the scholastic, religious and political affairs of the courts of her father and brother, and also the pious learned circle of her stepmother Catherine Parr. As well as being the only queen of Henry VIII to outlive the king, Parr was a groundbreaking scholar of her age, whose achievements have perhaps not always been recognised in the literature. Notably, she was the first woman 'to publish in print a work of her own under her own name' (Mueller 2011: 1), her *Prayers or Meditations* in 1545, and her devotional writings, activities and patronage were recognised and applauded by her contemporaries (see Mueller 2011). Parr is considered to have been an influential figure for Elizabeth until her early death in childbirth in 1548, encouraging some of Elizabeth's earliest displays of learning (such as her translation of Marguerite d'Navarre's *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*) as well as providing her with a maternal figure (Demers 2005: 103; Borman 2009: 83).

<sup>2</sup> Anne Somerset, on the other hand, considers the evidence proving Ashley's competence in the Classical languages to be 'obscure' (1991: 14).

Some historians have emphasised Elizabeth's lack of autonomy during this period. As the female heir to the throne, Elizabeth occupied a privileged but uncertain position,

vulnerable to a seemingly infinite assortment of competing interests holding considerable influence over her personal and political fate [...] continually subject to unpredictable and uncontrollable external forces (Cavanagh 1998: 9).

Elizabeth found herself in a number of serious predicaments during her adolescence and early adulthood. She was removed from the succession by her father in the late 1530s, and after a series of 'dizzying changes' was only restored in 1542 (Cavanagh 1998: 18). During her brother's reign, the Seymour affair posed a serious risk to Elizabeth's social standing. In January and February 1549 Elizabeth was interrogated over allegations that she had schemed to marry Thomas Seymour, Lord Admiral without King Edward VI's permission. Aged only 15, this proved a significant test of the young princess's resolve; it was also a test of her communication skills, as she wrote a series of letters to the Lord Protector stating her innocence. During her sister's reign, Elizabeth was again accused of treason and this time imprisoned in the Tower. Fearing for her life, she penned the "Tide" letter to her sister Mary I, pleading her loyalty. Tracy Borman (2009: 151) suggests that it was here Elizabeth learnt 'the strength of her own ability to talk—and write—her way out of danger'.

The learned, subservient girl of the pre-accession period contrasts with the post-accession Elizabeth, whom Starkey (2000: iii) has described as 'the bewigged and beruffed Gloriana'. As Queen, she moved geographically and socially to occupy the central position at Court, and surrounded herself with a core team of male councillors and advisers. The highly transitional nature of the outer Court ensured a steady stream of ambitious men attempting to gain Elizabeth's attention.<sup>3</sup> In this period, her power and political influence is more clearly defined than the uncertain status she held in her adolescence. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, Elizabeth's education was less unusual, and her high level of learning was shared by many of her courtiers. Elizabeth encouraged those around her to be the best and the brightest through her patronage and endorsement, and maintained her pre-accession scholarship through a number of translations and other literary writings.

But there was also political and ideological conflict. Queen Elizabeth was an unmarried female ruler in a traditionally male role, representing

<sup>3</sup> Roger Ascham provides an insightful description of the Court in a letter to Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester: 'The queen being last at Westminster, I was everyday in the privy chamber, and every day in your lordship's chamber, but the throng of your lordship's business and the thrust of importunate suitors kept me from speaking with your lordship', written 5<sup>th</sup> August 1564 (Giles 1864: 101).

a 'spectacular exception' to the norm, and 'a challenge to the homology between hierarchies of rule and gender [...] a cognitive dissonance with both political and affective consequences' (Montrose 2006: 1). As was noted above, Elizabeth's response to the conflict between her gender and position has been the focus of much scholarly attention in the last 30 years. Underlying this research is the perception that 'Elizabeth felt that monarchs created themselves through language' (Frye 1993: 4) and many studies subsequently examine Elizabeth's self-representation through her use of metaphor, analogy and other figurative devices. Research covers the spectrum of Elizabeth's writings, including her parliamentary speeches (Heisch 1975, 1980; Rose 2000), Latin University orations (Shenk 2003), other public orations (Green 1997), her prayers (May 2007), her poetry (Summit 1996), her letters (Doran 2000) and her translations (Archer 1995).

These analyses have produced no general consensus. Instead, a plurality of readings has emerged out of the semantic and rhetorical content of Elizabeth's writing. One of the earliest and best known proposals is the 'honorary male' concept, which suggests that the queen aligned herself with masculine social norms in order to deal with the gender pressures created by her role as monarch. Proponents of this interpretation suggest that Elizabeth embraced male characteristics such as 'dominance, aggression, and fearlessness' (Taylor-Smith 1984: 70), invoked the vocabulary of 'the male heroics of action' in her public speeches (Rose 2000: 1079–1080), 'did nothing to upset or interfere with male notions of how the world was or should be' and drew attention only to her gender's weaknesses (Heisch 1980: 53). Other accounts argue that the perspective of Elizabeth's adopted masculinity is too narrow, despite the legitimate argument that Elizabeth's role, at least, was traditionally male. Instead, they argue that Elizabeth's understanding of her social role and gender is more complex. Some studies describe Elizabeth's self-representation as androgynous, seen in her adoption of the neutral term 'prince' (Mueller 2001: 4). Others have identified feminine attributes, maternal and step-maternal imagery (Vanhoutte 2009), and of course Elizabeth's identification as 'the virginal Goddess', which allowed Elizabeth 'to derive special status as a female monarch' and claim affinity with other Biblical 'providential figures' (Doran 1998: 36). The sociolinguistic approach propounded here offers a different, complementary perspective on this on-going and complex debate.

The process of exploring, establishing and testing connections between the linguistic evidence and Elizabeth's biographical experiences is a fundamental component of the proposed idiolectal analysis, and a vital step if we are to properly assess the significance of Elizabeth's accession in relation to other potentially influential events in her biography.



### 1.3 *Research Question 2: Can a sociolinguistic analysis of Elizabeth's idiolect provide a useful means for assessing authorship?*

The second research question explores whether sociolinguistic idiolectal data can be used to establish the authorship of other texts purportedly written by Elizabeth. The field of authorship analysis is normally the concern of forensic linguistics (see Coulthard & Johnson 2007) and stylometry (e.g. Hoover 2010). The intention here is to assess what idiolectal data and the sociolinguistic framework can add to the analysis of historical documents. An evaluation of the merits and limitations of the different approaches for historical authorship analysis is beyond the remit of the present study, although such an investigation is highly desirable.

The applicability of a sociolinguistic approach for authorship analysis was first tested in Jonathan Hope's (1994) investigation of the language of William Shakespeare. Hope used quantitative methods to identify morphosyntactic features known to be undergoing change during Shakespeare's lifetime (e.g. relative clauses, periphrastic *do*) and establish the patterns of usage within plays of known and unknown authorship. Crucially, Hope's comparative method then accounted for the social factors that contribute to linguistic variation and change, such as age and social status, and also stylistic and contextual elements. Patterns could therefore be predicted, justified and explained by reference to the alleged author's biography, what Hope calls 'socio-historical linguistic evidence' (1994: xv); for example, the educational differences between Shakespeare and John Fletcher. The social significance of linguistic variation is a fundamental element of the sociolinguistic approach, and enables the analyst to evaluate the significance of the linguistic features in (or absent from) a text, and their relationship with the social identity of the proposed author. I consider Hope's method to be a persuasive demonstration of the possibilities of authorship analysis within a sociolinguistic framework, and indicative of the insight my own data may provide for analyses of Elizabeth's authorship.

Sociolinguistic studies of authorship since Hope have been surprisingly sparse, but important developments have been made in related areas. Since Hope's investigation, our documentation and understanding of macro-level linguistic trends in a sociolinguistic context has been greatly enhanced by the availability of socially stratified corpora, such as the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (henceforth CEEC). Now we are able to pinpoint specific elements of a trend by speakers' social groups and offer more rigorous and robust descriptions and interpretations of linguistic change. My analysis thus builds on the early techniques of Hope (1994) by incorporating the advances in source data, electronic methods and the better macro-level documentation of linguistic change and social stratifica-