

# ERRATAS: Charting the philological reliability of modern editions of English historical texts



## 1. AIM: QUALITY CONTROL

Historical corpora of manuscript (hand-written) texts have primarily been compiled from (modern) **printed editions**: trade-off of quality for quantity, not all linguistic features of manuscript texts retained in corpora. Text features ignored or **modernised** in editions include e.g. layout, script, **spelling**.

Therefore, historical corpora are generally considered unsuitable for studying spelling. ERRATAS aims to remedy this by **evaluating** printed editions of historical letters to try and categorise degrees of editorial intervention, and, thus, determine the level of **philological reliability** of printed editions.

## 2. MATERIAL: *Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC)*

Linguistic corpus of English **personal letters**: 5.1m words in 12,000 letters written by 1,200 writers between 1402-1800. Designed for the **sociolinguistic** study of morphology and syntax: comes with **metadata** on social backgrounds of correspondents (age, gender, social rank, education, etc). Compiled from 192 printed 'original-spelling' editions (see [www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/CEEC/](http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/CEEC/)).

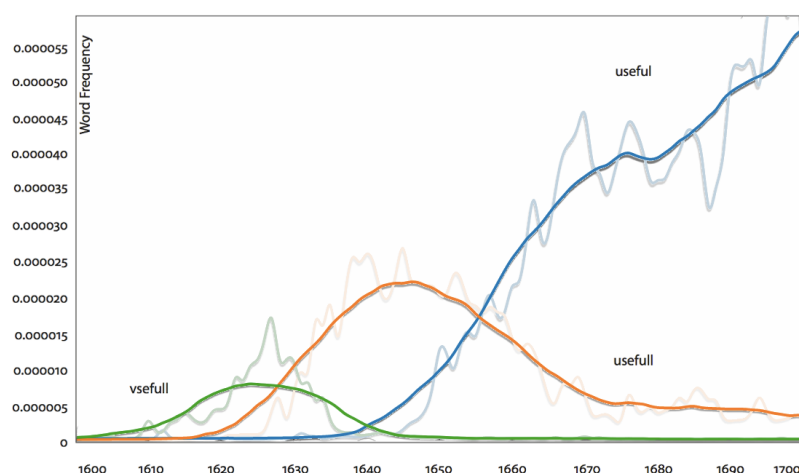
## 3. FOCUS: SPELLING

What we know of the history of English spelling is based on printed texts. Little is known about English **private spelling practices** 1400–1800, as no long-term philologically reliable data is available.

Historical English spelling is characterised by **variation**. In Shakespeare's English, the letters <u> and <v> both could stand for the sounds /u/ and /v/: e.g. "vp" for *up*, and "giue" for *give* was normal and

accepted. Usage was not categorical: all writers showed variation: e.g. writing *giue* but also *ever*.

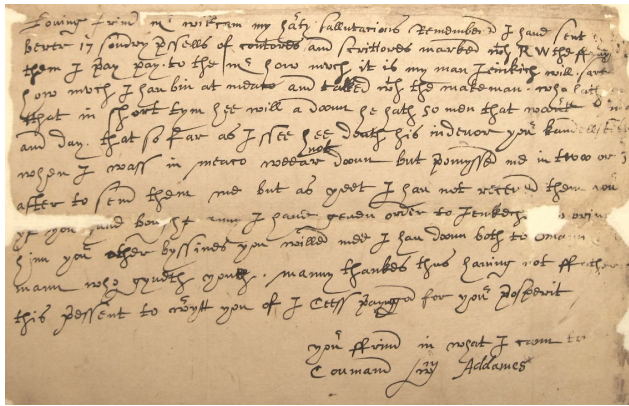
Old forms (*giue*, *vp*) were common until late 1600s, but English spelling began to be **standardised** in the 1600s. This first happened in printed texts: this chart shows how the word *USEFUL* in printed texts (EEBO) was first spelt *vsefull*; then *usefull*; and finally *useful*.



## 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

🔍 What do editors *say* they have done to spellings? What have editors *actually* done?

In 'original-spelling editions', editors commonly **claim** that texts "have been published **precisely as written**". Yet this is usually followed by a list of features where this principle was *not* followed: usually in punctuation, some spelling variation, abbreviations (commonly expanded), and capitalisation.



=?=

259 | William Adams at Sakai to Richard Wickham at Hirado, November 1617  
 IOR: E/3/5 no. 562<sup>1</sup>  
 1 folio, 32.5×24.5cm, damaged r/h edge  
 SP II p.75, Riess pp.206–07, Murakami p.56, LR VI pp.169–70  
 1617 in Sakaye

Loving frind Mr Wiccam, my harty sallutations remembered. I have sent by this berer 17 sondry p'ssells of contores and scrittores marked w'th R.W. The frayt of them I pray pay to the m'r how much it is. My man Jeinkich will sartyfy you how much. I hav bin at Meaco and talked w'th the makeman, who hath promysed that in short tym hee will a-dooon. He hath 50 men that woourketh night and day, that, so far as I see, hee douth his indevor. Your kandellstikes, when I was in Meaco, wecar not dooun, but promysed me in two or 3 days after to send them me, but as yeet I have not receved them. Your [1cm missing], yf you have bought anny, I have geven order to Jenkechee to bring w'th him. Your other byssines you willed mee I have dooun, both to Omaun & the mann, who gyveth you manny thanks. Thus, having not futher at this pressent to wrytt you of, I ceess, praying God for your prosperity.

Your frind in what I cann to coumand  
 W'm Addames

## Do editorial practices form a hierarchy?

If editorial practices cluster – if feature A is modernised, what about features B and C? – we can form a typology to allow us to evaluate, based on looking only at certain textual features, how faithfully an edition retains manuscript reality. Although we hope to uncover trends that can be applied to all editions of historical texts, within the STRATAS project the primary question is:

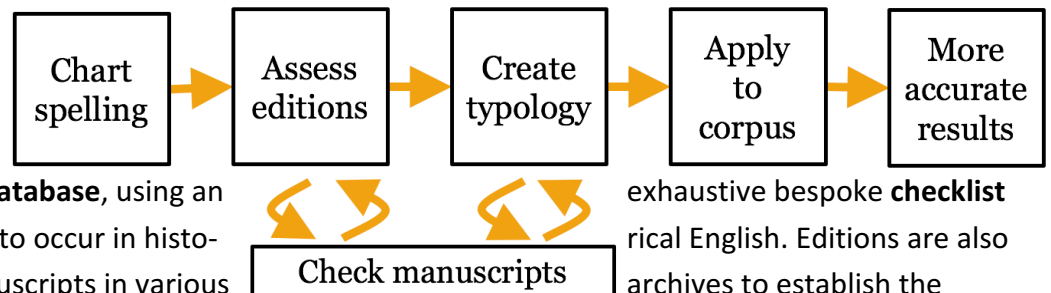
Can CEEC be used to study English private spelling practices 1400-1800?

## 5. METHODS

**Manual checking:** editorial principles and practices are recorded into a **database**, using an

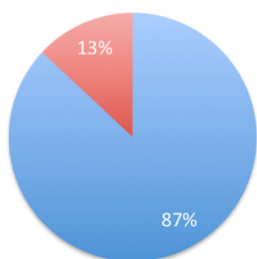
of textual features known to occur in histo-spot-checked against manuscripts in various

veracity of our deductions. The resulting database can then be incorporated into a corpus as metadata, and texts in the corpus given **ratings** of philological reliability.

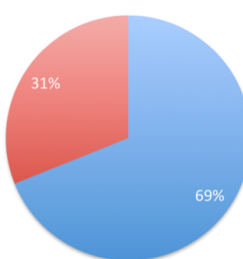


## 6. INITIAL FINDINGS

- Editors are unreliable:** We have found no direct correlation of explicit editorial principles and the philological reliability of editions. Yet the age of the edition does not appear to be a factor either.
- The ERRATAS method works,** and can be used to identify which editions can be used to study manuscript spelling.
- Example:** <u/v>-variation (*giue* vs *give*, *vp* vs *up*). In CEEC (all 17C letters), the new form (*give*, *up*) is dominant: the old form occurs 13% of the time. After identifying the best editions used in CEEC, in



In all corpus texts



In best editions

the resulting corpus (a subset of the previous), the old form occurs 31% of the time.

With editorial interference thus reduced, the results of corpus searches are closer to manuscript reality (actual private spelling practices).