

SLIN17 Conference Report

The seventeenth edition of Italy's biennial Conference on the History of the English Language took place in Ragusa on 22-24 October 2015. Organised by Massimo Sturiale (Catania-Ragusa), and hosted by the "Struttura Didattica Speciale di Lingue e Letterature straniere" of the University of Catania, the Conference was held at the Auditorium of Santa Teresa in Ragusa Ibla. The Conference's Scientific Committee consisted of Nicholas Brownlees (Florence), Marina Dossena (Bergamo), Giovanni Iamartino (Milan), Gabriella Mazzon (Innsbruck) and Massimo Sturiale (Catania-Ragusa).

Entitled "Labelling English, English Labelled: From the 9th Century to Late Modern Times", the Conference set out to explore topics such as Metalinguistic awareness and its development through time; English language ideology; English and Englishness; Labels and the codification of English. Given their expertise in these research fields the three invited plenary speakers were Richard Watts (Bern), Ulrich Busse (Halle-Wittenberg) and Joan C. Beal (Sheffield). These speakers' publications include *Language Myths and the History of English* (Watts), *Linguistic Variation in the Shakespeare Corpus: Morpho-syntactic Variability of Second Person Pronouns* (Busse) and *English in Modern Times 1700-1945* (Beal).

The Conference began on the afternoon of 22 October with welcoming addresses by Prof. Zago (Head of the "Struttura Didattica Speciale di Lingue e letterature straniere") and the *Assessore alla cultura* for Ragusa, to which the Conference organiser, Massimo Sturiale, responded with thanks for their generous support and collaboration. In this opening address Sturiale also gave warm thanks to Carmela Nocera (Catania) for her primary role in History of the English language (HEL) studies at the University of Catania. She was not only the founder of HEL at the university almost thirty years ago but also organised the very successful SLIN4 Conference in Catania in 1991. The fact that twenty-four years later Catania, and particularly Ragusa, were once more hosting SLIN was an enormous privilege.

The first session, that was chaired by Donatella Montini (Rome, "Sapienza"), included papers given by Valeria Di Clemente (Catania-Ragusa) and Iolanda Plescia (Rome, Sapienza). The former's paper was entitled "Ælfgiue on englisc, Ymma on frencisc: linguistic and other identities in ASC, MS F, 1017", and in it Di Clemente examined possible political and symbolic motives behind the renaming of Emma (Ymma in the ASC) to that of Ælfgifu upon the arrival in England in 1002 of the Norman-born widow of Edmund's father, king Æþelred II. Plescia, instead, considered the concept of what is meant by the term 'English' in her provocatively-entitled paper "Did Shakespeare write in English?". In her analysis Plescia considered the extent to which Shakespeare's language is close or distant from modern-day English.

The first plenary speaker, Richard Watts, gave a very challenging and entertaining paper entitled "From labels to assumed facts: Challenging the discursive construction of 'English'". His essential tenet was that traditional labels adopted in the classification of English, and its historical development, need to be understood within the context in which they first coined. Such labels may hinder a full understanding of the discursive structure of English. In place of such labels, Watts considered the relevance of the concept of

‘performance’ in communication. In the book he is presently writing, he is examining aspects relating to this communication paradigm.

The concluding session on Thursday afternoon comprised presentations by Giovanni Iamartino, Elisabetta Lonati (Milan) and Gabriella Mazzon. Iamartino looked at the role of a little-studied, but significant man of letters in Cromwellian England. The person in question, James Howell, was a traveller, diplomat, poet, translator and polymath. In his study of Howell, Iamartino focused on how Howell’s metalinguistic awareness of the nature and history of English was aimed at searching for the language’s identity vis-à-vis “the three noblest languages of Europe”, that is, French, Italian and Spanish. Elisabetta Lonati (Milan) also focused on metalinguistic features in her paper “Medical Discourse in Late Modern English: metalinguistic awareness and linguistic identity”. She illustrated various language strategies employed by writers of medical texts to address respectively expert, semi-expert and non-expert readerships. In the final paper of the day “The barbarians’ revenge: Counter-discourse on language in the British Isles from the 17th to the 19th century”, Gabriella Mazzon switched the participants’ attention to the concept of ‘pedigree’ and how this concept was invoked by Celtic communities so as to grant prestige to their language varieties. The case of the so-called “Welsh Indians” was one of the more striking examples of this counter-discourse.

Friday’s first morning session, that was chaired by Luisanna Fodde (Cagliari), focused on lexicography. In the first presentation “‘Pompous luxuriance’ versus ‘selection’”, Ruxandra Vişan (Bucharest) looked at Samuel Johnson’s lexicographical objectives, one of which was his aversion to exaggerated inclusiveness or “pompous luxuriance” as a lexicographical principle. Laura Pinnavaia (Milan) also focused on mid-eighteenth century English lexicography, though in her paper — “The lexicographer’s voice: Charles Richardson’s ‘labels’ in the *New English Dictionary* (1837-8)” — she examined metalinguistic labels in the dictionary of one of Johnson’s precursors. The third paper in the session on lexicography was given by Alessandra Vicentini (Insubria). In “Labelling Infectious Diseases in Late Modern English Medical Lexicography” she focused on how infectious diseases were named and classified in some Late Modern English specialised and general dictionaries as well as encyclopaedias.

Ulrich Busse’s plenary paper was entitled “Modelling and re-modelling English: What models and labels tell us about changing research paradigms”. In a wide-sweeping, insightful overview of historical models adopted in the classification of English, Busse demonstrated how the various models (e.g. chronological, biological, and socio-political models) emphasized or highlighted specific aspects of the language, while simultaneously backgrounding others. By connecting the different models and labels to paradigm shifts in English linguistics, Busse illustrated the ways in which such labels related to specific research agendas.

The final session of the morning was entirely dedicated to place-names and the research being carried out at the University of Nottingham into their creation and usage in the Anglo-Saxon period. The three researchers who presented papers on the topic were John Baker, Jayne Carroll and Eleanor Rye. The papers were respectively entitled “The language of English domination: place-names and administrative

labels in a linguistic frontier zone”, “Situating English linguistic identity in the Early Middle Ages: labels, place-names, and speech communities in Anglo-Saxon England” and “What language is that, and why does it matter? Place-names and linguistic labels in north-west England”. The research covered in the three presentations raised interesting features of linguistic identity and cross-language contact.

In the afternoon Marina Dossena, Luisanna Fodde and Maria Luisa Maggioni (Milan, “Cattolica”) moved our attention beyond English borders. In the first paper, entitled “Vulgar, pedantic, and obsolete (though not necessarily in that order): Usage guides, social commentary and views on education in Late Modern Scotland”, Dossena examined aspects of metalinguistic self-consciousness in Late Modern Scotland. Through references to qualifiers in contemporary publications, the speaker explored some of the ideological positions that influenced positive or negative attitudes to Scottish forms of the day. Fodde, instead, examined attitudes to American English in “It is not English that he writes, Sir; it is American ...”: Anglo-American interactions and the recognition of American Speech”. In particular, Fodde focused on the linguistic phenomena and features that differentiated American English from its British counterpart during the years before and after American Independence. The geographical variety of English that Maria Luisa Maggioni (Milan, Cattolica) examined in “English: a language for the ‘rainbow country’” was South African English, and, in particular, the influence of Afrikaans in the formation of this geographical variety. Part of Maggioni’s research is based on an empirical study of Afrikaans loanwords (or calques on Afrikaans) in South African English.

The afternoon session on Friday afternoon should have also included Joan Beal’s plenary paper but unfortunately due to last-minute family problems she was not able to attend the Conference. It was a great pity because her paper “Named and shamed: Labels for non-standard pronunciation in 18th-century pronouncing dictionaries” would have undoubtedly been very interesting. Nevertheless, we look forward to the publication of her contribution in the conference volume.

In her place, Nicholas Brownlees’s and Rita Queiroz De Barros’s papers were brought forward from the Saturday morning session. In “Translation as label and practice in early modern English news”, Brownlees analysed metatextual labels that publishers, editors and authors used in relation to the translation into English of foreign news from 1580-1640. Rita Queiroz De Barros (Lisbon) also focused on news texts in “On 19th century labels for English (es): examples drawn from Charles Dickens’s journals”. The paper looked at the use of labels regarding English varieties found in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, two weekly journals edited by Dickens.

On Saturday morning the two papers that concluded the conference were given by Rosella Tinaburri (Cassino) and Massimo Sturiale. Tinaburri examined the label *englisc* in “The use of the word *englisc* in the preface to the Old English version of the *Pastoral Care*”, while Sturiale illustrated the important role of the press in nineteenth-century Britain in promoting and enforcing a standard language ideology. As indicated by the title of the paper — “[Sir] Who is the English Authority on Pronunciation?": Labelling English pronunciation for the masses: 19th-century newspapers and the standard accent propaganda” — Sturiale focused on issues relating to the pronunciation of English.

Sturiale's paper was the last of twenty studies on the historical role of labels in the development and understanding of English. In these papers, the speakers successfully drew attention to the significance of an epistemological construct in the production and reception of a wide range of text types across various historical periods. The debate and discussion arising from the papers was vigorous and rewarding, and for this we would like to thank not only the speakers but also other SLIN members who attended the Conference. These colleagues included Mirella Billi (Viterbo), Donatella Montini (Rome, "Sapienza") and Daniela Francesca Viridis (Cagliari).

However, as with all SLIN meetings, invigorating intellectual engagement was supported by an equally enjoyable social programme. A very debonair and fit-looking Massimo Sturiale not only treated participants to some of the best of Sicilian cuisine but also provided a most exciting and varied range of excursions. On the culinary side the high point was no doubt the Conference dinner. Held at the Antico Convento dei Cappuccini, the menu featured *Timballino di melanzana con cuore di bufala e Coulis di pomodoro*, *Calamarata con zucca e pancetta* and *Filetto di maialino con caponatina al cacao amaro*. Simply superb. And what can one say about the extra-conference activities? Well, Massimo certainly was the first SLIN Conference organizer to charter a train all for ourselves. This was on Friday afternoon, when the local Ragusa Ibla train took SLIN participants on the Ragusa Ibla tour. Magnificent, and a trip that especially meant a lot to me. The train ride took place just before my own paper, and as we got on board not a few of the SLIN group joyously called out, "Come on Nick! Give your paper on the train, we promise we will listen!" How nice, I thought. I always appreciate such eagerness to hear my papers. Indeed, I was just starting to give my paper when one of the group, grinning, started making loud train "chuff-chuff" noises, which rather drowned out what I was saying. A pity.

However, the train was not the only means of travel. On Saturday afternoon, Massimo hired a mini bus to take us to Piazza Armerina and Caltagirone. The mosaics in Piazza Armerina were astounding while Caltagirone surprised not a few of us for its beautiful monumental steps. The guide said there were 142 of them, which is no doubt true (certainly none of us seemed inclined to put her word to the test).

In my opinion SLIN 17 was one of SLIN's most successful conferences. The organization was superb, and for this thanks should also be given to Maria Concetta Sciacco (Catania-Ragusa), who helped the Secretariat, as well as Massimo's MA students including Chiara, Giordana, Luca, Manuela and Veronica. Their professional expertise and enthusiasm embraced the whole event, ensuring that all those who attended will remember their days in Ragusa for much time to come.

Massimo and his team organised a great Conference, and richly deserved our most heartfelt thanks.

Nicholas Brownlees