Early modern English contractions and their relevance to present-day English

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English contractions have their own history

Introduction

Are contractions like *don't* and *it's* typical of 'modern' English? To what extent were they present in early modern English? This paper endeavours to answer these questions. However, it also sets out to answer another one: early modern English had a set of contractions of its own, and the question is why they disappeared and whether they are still in any way relevant to contemporary English.

Since plays are presumably intended to represent the way people actually speak and therefore constitute the works in which contractions are most likely to be found, in order to address these issues the author examined a corpus of 43 plays written between 1538 and 1700.

The rise of the modern contractions

The oldest contraction of all seems to be that of *will*, used by Chaucer, though limited to *he'll*. As regards *I'll*, *she'll*, *we'll*, they make a first timid appearance soon after the middle of the 16th century. The forms of the future with *you* and *they* appear to come rather later, with Marlowe, i.e. in the 1580s–1590s.

The contraction of *is* to *'s* is also present to some extent soon after 1550, and then becomes frequent with writers like Marlowe and Shakespeare. It is not easy to say whether *'s* can also represent *has*. We frequently find it before *come*, *fled* and *gone*, but since the auxiliary used with verbs of movement is predominantly *be*, it seems likely that in such cases too *'s* represents *is*.

Several modern forms seem to emerge for the first time in Marlowe. In addition to those mentioned we find *I'd* = *I would*, *you'd* = *you would*, *he'd* = *he would*, *she'd* = *she would*, *I'm*, *he's*, *she's*, *it's*, *you're*, *that's*, *what's*, *where's*, *who's* and *let's*. In more or less the same period as Marlowe, in Shakespeare we find *we're*, *they're* and *there's*, and also questions like *where's* + *he/she*.

Forms found in writers in the middle and later seventeenth century are *won't* and *when's*. The very last years of the 17th century bring a crop of new apostrophised forms: *can't*, *don't*, *mayn't*, *shan't*, *won't* and *we've*. Smith (1999: 138) says there is evidence that forms like *don't*, *won't* and *can't* 'were in existence in speech in Shakespeare's time'. However, in the plays it is precisely only in the very last years of the period that these contractions are actually attested in writing.

All the following appear, instead, to have arisen after the early modern English period: *aren't*,

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couldn't, didn't, doesn't, hadn't, hasn't, haven't, isn't, mightn't, needn't, oughtn't, shouldn't, wasn't, weren't, wouldn't; what're, who're; it'll, there'll, what'll, who'll; it'd and *'d* for *had*.

In approximate chronological order (the approximation is due to the major uncertainty about the dating of many of the works), the plays are the following: John Bale, *King Johan* (1538); Nicholas Udall, *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552); Thomas Sackville and Thomas West, *Gorboduc* (1561); Richard Edwards, *Damon and Pithias* (1564); Anon, *Gammer Gurtons Needle* (1566); George Gascoigne, *Supposes* (1566; translation of Ariosto); John Pikeryng, *Horestes* (1567); Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus* (1588?); Anon, *Edmund Ironsides* (1590); Wm. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1592); Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II* (1592); Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592); Wm. Shakespeare, *Richard III* (1594); Anon, *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (1594); Wm. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1596); Ben Jonson, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598); Anon, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1598); Wm. Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* (1599); *Henry V* (1599); Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599); Robert Greene, *The Comicall Historie of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1599); Anon, *The Wisdom of Dr Dodypoll* (1600); Wm. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (1601); Anthony Munday, *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* (1601); Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603); Wm. Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1604–6); Anon, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605); Wm. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1605); Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (1605–6); George Chapman, *Monsieur d'Olive* (1606); Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607; also attributed to Middleton); John Webster, *The White Devil* (1609–1612); Wm. Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1610); Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613); Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Rule a Wife, and Have a Wife* (1624); John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633); John Dryden, *All for Love* (1678); Thomas Otway, *Venice Preserved* (1682); Sir John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse* (1696); George Farquhar, *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1699); Wm. Congreve, *The Way of the World* (1700).

Quantification of the modern contractions in early modern English texts

In addition to knowing what contractions were present in early modern English literature, it also appears interesting to know how much they were used. The approximate percentage covered in the corpus by each single contraction type found can be seen in Table 1. (Since the percentages are approximate the sum is not 100.)

As can be seen, and perhaps not surprisingly, the highest percentage refers to the verb *to be*, above all the first person. More surprising, perhaps, is the large number of contractions of *will*. This might be because this contraction had already begun to be established earlier. Probably also important is the fact that *will*, as in present-day English, is at least three things: an expression of volition, especially in the first person singular; prediction; and 'commitment' (promise, threat, etc.).

There are few contractions of *to have*; as mentioned, there appear to be none at all of *has*. The incidence appears particularly low when we make a comparison with present-day English. We are told (Leech 2001: 130) that in the written part of the *British National Corpus* contractions of *have* and *has* (843) amount to about one-third of contractions of *am*, *are* and *is* (2611). By contrast, in the corpus examined the ratio between *have* and *be* contractions is around 1: 30.

The total number of verb contractions found in the plays is 5939. Since the total number of words in the plays is about 949,990, contractions account for about 0.6% of all words. In order to appraise whether this figure is as low as it seems, a comparison was made with a group of plays written in the eighteenth century[1] as well as a group of plays written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,[2] with reference to contractions known to have been used in the earlier period: personal pronouns + *to be*, *that's*, *what's*, *where's*, *who's*; *'ll*; *'ve*; *'d* (*would*); *can't*, *don't*, *won't* and *shan't*. The relevant figures for the eighteenth century and the later period proved to be 1.2% and 1.8% respectively. Even these may not seem very high, but 1.2% is twice as high and 1.8% three times as high as the percentage for the earlier period.

Regarding a possible increase in the use of contractions over the period, the earliest plays contain none of the modern contractions at all, and other early ones contain very few of them. Partridge (1963: 3) suggests it is above all after 1600 that we really begin to find very high figures. The climax appears to be reached at the end of the period, with

Type	'm	're	's	'll	've	'd = would	'd = had	d'ye/ d'ee	let's	'nt	Total
Number	302	113	2104	2374	81	121	14	57	229	309	5704
PERCENTAGE	5	1.9	35.4	40	1.4	2	0.4	0.9	3.8	5.2	(96)

Table 1: Percentage contribution of contraction types

a little under 700 contractions in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), just over 500 in Farquhar's *Beaux' Stratagem* (1699) and over 450 in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). Dramatists at the end of the 17th century were writing about English society in the audience's own time, and it might have seemed more natural in plays of this kind that characters should speak in a 'colloquial' manner than in a play about the past history of Britain or one set in ancient Rome. However, this would not explain why in Dryden's *All for Love* (1678) we have quite a large number of contractions – just over 200. Dryden belonged to a generation that had a marked sense of literary decorum, which also led him to be a little critical of Shakespeare in his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1688). It does not seem at all likely that in dealing with a 'serious' subject like the tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra he would have wanted a 'colloquial' tone: if he uses a lot of contractions it is presumably because these are now increasingly felt to be part of the language.

These data do tend to confirm the 'modernity' of the contractions in question, since the closer we come to our own day the higher the figures are. This is even truer of the *range* of different contractions, as opposed to the mere quantity.

Significance of modern contractions in early modern English texts

One may wonder whether the choice between contraction and full form already had a clear register connotation in early modern English writings, but this does not appear to be the case: contractions are not automatically used in 'informal' speech or in that of uneducated characters. For instance, in a dialogue of just under 300 words in Act II, scene ii of the anonymous *Edmund Ironside*, between the poor man Edrick and his wife and son, we see just one contraction in *'ll* and two instances of the old contraction *'tis*, and, by contrast, 9 instances in which the writer could have contracted but apparently chose not to do so: *he is*, *I am* (3 times), *Son is*, *We are*, *we shall*, *Who*

is and *You are*. In many other works too, we find that in the speech of plebeian characters the dramatists freely choose between contracted and uncontracted forms.

Nor is there any certainty that contractions will *not* be used when the register appears to be formal. For example, in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* the Princess says "Men oft are valu'd high, when they're most wretched," which may seem odd, seeing the character's status and the philosophising tone of the line. Similarly, Marlowe's Faustus, at the dramatic moment when he is about to be damned for all time, says "I'll burn my books." Or again, in *Henry V* Shakespeare has the king say, "France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe."

Partridge (1964: 11) suggests that contractions were branded as vulgar by schoolmasters with great success and disappeared from ordinary conversation. However, dramatists may not have been aware of these strictures or may have ignored them. At all events, it is not at all evident that contractions in themselves were seen as being in some way 'improper': this is almost certainly an idea that spread later.

It might be supposed that contractions were used for metrical convenience, i.e. to eliminate an unwanted extra syllable. This may sometimes be the case, but we can also find plenty of instances of contraction possibly being avoided in order for the metre to be right. Hence metrical requirements were probably not decisive in determining the incidence of contraction. Moreover, if writers felt they could freely alternate contracted and full forms on a metrical basis, this tends to confirm that they felt no register constraint. In any case, the metrical issue would not explain why we often find contractions in prose passages too.

Other contractions in early modern English writers

Early modern English texts contain a few obsolete verbal contractions. In the corpus there are several instances of contraction of auxiliaries preceded by

thou, the commonest case being that of *thou'rt* for *thou art*. There is also a contraction for the conditional which is formally equivalent to modern *'d*, namely *'ld* (e.g. *he'ld*, equivalent to modern *he'd*), frequent in Shakespeare. In a few cases we also find a curious contraction of *he is* to *ha's*. Early modern English writers used one other verbal contraction, that of the past tense or participle of regular verbs, e.g. *drown'd*. Actually, this contraction was far commoner than any other in the corpus. In addition, these writers used a series of other grammatical contractions, mainly of pronouns. These will now be examined.

Probably the obsolete grammatical contraction that we most readily associate with early modern English literature is proclitic contraction of *it*, as in *'tis*. We also find the same contraction of *it* before *has*, *is*, *was*, *were* ('would be'), *will* and *would*, but certainly *'tis* is the commonest case, accounting for almost 50% of instances of proclitic contraction of *it* and being far more frequent than *it's*.

Regarding *enclitic* contraction of *it*, we find it after the following kinds of words: prepositions – above all *for*, followed by *on* (mostly representing *of*), *to* and others; parts of the verb *to be* (*is't*, *was't*, *were't*); various other verbs, mostly non-finite (above all the infinitive), and a few optatives (*may't*, *be't*); conjunctions (*an't, if't* and others); assorted other words.

The most widespread other contraction that we find is that of *th'* for *the*; the latter can also reduce to *t'*, but only before *other*; *t'* can also stand for *to* before an infinitive. Another quite frequent case is that of reduction of *his* to *'s*, for example "with a bottle at 's tail" (Webster, *The White Devil*). In a small number of cases, instead, *'s* stands for *us*, as in "And take upon's the mystery of things" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*). Another possessive adjective which is contracted is *our*, but only in *by'r lady*, or, with the same meaning, *by'r lakin*. A grammatical contraction which is not rare, though not very frequent, is that of *you* to *y'*, in *y'are*.

There are also some cases in which we should perhaps speak of elision rather than contraction, since the number of syllables remains unaltered. The most significant case is that of *'em* for *them*, followed by *o'* for *of* (and rarely for *on*) and *i'* for *in*. Both of the latter very frequently precede *th'*, giving for example "Take heed o'th' Hollanders" (Beaumont and Fletcher, *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*) and "there's gunpowder i' th' court" (Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*).

Significance of the earlier contractions

As in the case of the later contractions, there is no evident connection between the earlier contractions and an informal register. Moreover, in this case too it is not at all evident that contractions are used in order to eliminate syllables: some of the older contractions can be found at line ends, where the dramatist could simply have put in an extra unstressed syllable. For instance, Tourneur in *The Revenger's Tragedy* has Spurio say at a line end "No, mad and think upon't!" Here the dramatist could easily have written *upon it*. It seems unlikely that he would have objected to a verse ending in an unstressed syllable: indeed, shortly afterwards he has the Duchess say four consecutive lines ending respectively with *bastard*, *nature*, *commandment* and *justice*. It is also worth noting that over 40% of the enclitic contractions of *it* in the corpus are in plays in prose, where there would have been no metrical problem. Then, as regards the use of, say, *'em* at the end of a line, as in "Dew-lapp'd like bulls, whose throats had hanging at 'em' / Wallets of flesh" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*), this makes no difference to the number of syllables compared to *them*. What seems more likely is that the dramatist judged it easier for the actor to say *'em* rather than *them* in certain positions (in the specific case after *at*), just as today too we often find it convenient to reduce *them* to *'em*.

Presumably, everyone would agree that if we now write, say, *what's* or *they'll*, it is because we feel that these are valid representations of things that people say. They may be considered good or bad representations, but the point is that these graphic conventions are intended to reflect actual pronunciation. It is therefore logical to suppose that an early modern writer was doing exactly the same thing in writing *what's* or *they'll*, and it follows that we should make the same supposition about those grammatical contractions that now no longer exist.

Why did the older contractions disappear?

Thus both the modern and the older contractions represented real features of spoken English, yet the older ones disappeared. The explanation might seem to lie in the disappearance of the pronunciations that they represented. Shortly we will see that at least some of them probably did not disappear. Hence other factors have to be considered.

In an article in *The Tatler* of 28 September 1710 (Bond 1987: 190–6), Jonathan Swift complained about what he saw as certain new fashions in the way of writing English at the time. Among the fads he objected to were *do't* for *do it* and *upon't* for *upon it*. He was presumably not aware that Shakespeare, Webster, Dryden and other writers in the two preceding centuries had used these contractions. Elsewhere, indeed, in complaining about forms like *Drudg'd, Disturb'd, Rebuk't* and *Fledg'd*, he writes (Swift 1964: 11) that these have been spread by "the Poets, from the Time of the Restoration," clearly not realising that earlier writers had used them. Addison too (Bond 1965: 34) criticised such spellings, as well as ones like *mayn't, can't, sha'n't, wo'n't* for *may not, can not, shall not* and *will not*.

Interestingly, Swift accepts that these spellings possibly correspond to the way people effectively speak: he sarcastically observes (Bond 1987: 194) that "the usual Pretence is, That they spell as they speak: A noble Standard for Language!" In his works, Swift regularly uses *pretence* to mean *pretension*, and so in the passage quoted he is probably not doubting that people 'spell as they speak' but doubting whether they have the *right* to do so. He thus actually provides a good reason for thinking that the early modern writers too 'spelt as they spoke'.

However, as mentioned, Swift does not seem to have realized that earlier writers had done this: both he and Addison appear to have lacked awareness of the historical role of certain contractions. It is true that there was still a major incidence of these in the eighteenth century: for example, the most famous older one, *'tis*, is used several times in Sheridan's *A School for Scandal*, written as late as 1777. Hence it is not clear to what extent we can blame Swift and Addison for the disappearance of the older contractions. However, their strictures may well have contributed to the probable misunderstanding of the latter that we almost certainly have in the nineteenth century. For instance, considering once again the 'most typical' one, *'tis*, poets like Byron and Shelley began to use this simply as a sort of poeticism: the latter, for example, in the fragment "The Daemon of the World" writes "'Tis but the voyage of a darksome hour" and "'Tis like a wondrous strain," where the search for a 'poetic' effect is also evidenced by lexical items like *darksome* and *wondrous*. Similarly, when Tennyson in 1850 writes "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all," the use of *'tis* is again an affectation, a way of harking back to an earlier mode of writing precisely for a sort of poetic

effect. Then by the time Lewis Carroll writes "Jabberwocky", in the 1870s, with its famous beginning "'Twas brillig and the slithy toves," forms in *'t* have become sheer parody. Thus, paradoxically, by using such forms poets possibly caused them not to be taken seriously.

Several nineteenth-century novelists probably also contributed to this development. When Emily Bronte in Yorkshire and Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot and D. H. Lawrence in the Midlands present the older contractions as 'dialectal' this looks convincing, since the relevant regions are contiguous. However, when we see that Scott does practically the same thing much further up, in Scotland, and even more that Hardy does it hundreds of miles further south, in Dorset, we may suspect that something is wrong: it looks as if what these writers perceived as 'dialectal' was common, instead, to the whole country, or at least to certain social classes everywhere – a wholly natural way of speaking not seen as such because written contractions like *do't, on't* or *'tis* were no longer generally used.

Thus probably the 'misuse' of such forms by poets and their 'misrepresentation' by novelists further weakened the status of the older contractions.

Possible present-day relevance of the older contractions

It is an observable fact that there are many cases in which the pronunciations referred to by the early modern writers have probably not disappeared. For example, it is quite easy to hear people saying what at one time would have been represented as *'tis, 'twas* or *'twould*. This seems particularly likely to happen in an 'emphatic' utterance, as when A says "I thought you said it was cold today" and B answers "It *is* cold": the words *It is* are likely to be pronounced /tiz/. Similarly, *it isn't* is likely to sound like /tiz(ə)nt/. Moreover, enclitic *it* can still sound like what at one time would have been represented as *'t*, for example in a sentence like "I can't do it now," while the phrase "in the car" might sound like what at one time would have been written as *i'th'car*. These are just a few examples of possible survival of older pronunciations.

If it is true that the relevant pronunciations still exist, it seems strange that the contractions representing them should have disappeared. Yet perhaps this should not surprise us. The fact is that even the 'modern' contractions have to a great extent lived

on sufferance, creating a curious hiatus between the spoken and the written language. This becomes more evident when a comparison is made with other languages. In Italian, for example, it is possible, when one wishes to speak in a very emphatic and rhetorical way, to split an item like *l'università* into article and noun, giving *la università*. Since this split is possible, if Italian were like English, people would probably be forced to write *la università* in a formal text, and indeed to say *la università* when speaking in a context that is at all formal, even though normally one would hardly even think of saying it: this is what has happened in English with, say, *didn't* vs. *did not*. English orthography has been conservative and intolerant, and has only granted limited circulation to such contractions. Even those graphemes that are to some extent allowed do not cover all pronunciations: for instance, there is no convention for representing the pronunciation of *must* as /məst/, /məs/, /məz/, /mz/ or simply /z/; and in a sentence like "The children have eaten," we may hear something that could be represented as *The children've eaten*, but we are never allowed to write this. Seeing this situation, it is hardly surprising that the older contractions have vanished, even if the corresponding pronunciations still exist.

Notes

1 John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728); Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer* (1766); R. B. Sheridan, *The Rivals* (1775) and *The School for Scandal* (1777); Sir Richard Steele, *The Conscious Lovers* (1722).
2 G. B. Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion* (1912) and *Pygmalion* (1914); Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895); Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Squire* (1905) and *The 'Mind the Paint' Girl* (1912).

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Authorities ban mixed English words "ungelivable" in publications

Arbitrary use of English words and acronyms is now prohibited and coined terms that are not intelligible to everyone, like the currently popular word "ungelivable" in China, are not allowed to be used in publications, according to a notice released by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) recently.

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Abuse of foreign languages, including arbitrary use of English words; acronym mixing in Mandarin and coined half-English, half-Chinese terms that are intelligible to nobody, are commonly seen.

All these have seriously damaged to the purity of the Chinese language and resulted in adverse social impacts to the harmonious and healthy cultural environment.

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