

A corpus analysis of the spread of standardised spelling in Middle English

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Outline of talk

1. (Very) brief history of English spelling
2. Chancery spelling in the fifteenth century
3. The MELD corpus and previous corpora
4. The digraph <ai>: variants used in the Eastern counties of England
 - a. Four main variants – across place and time
 - b. Intra-document variation
5. Conclusions

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(Very) brief history of English spelling

- Old English period (up to 1150):
 - Most surviving documents from West Saxon area
 - Relatively standard spelling
 - Small number of scribes
- Middle English period (1150-1500):
 - Surviving documents from across the country
 - Much writing in Latin or Norman French
 - Large number of scribes, massive variation
- Early Modern period (1500-1800):
 - Printing, dictionaries, education take off
 - Standardisation to what we know now as Standard English

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Chancery English

- The written English used by clerks to the King in London from around 1430s
- For a long time, believed that Midlands varieties predominantly fed into developing standard
- Benskin (2004) demonstrated that this was not accurate – London/Chancery English more influential
- Fifteenth century seen as beginning of move to standard Early Modern English

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Previous datasets

- Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English (LALME):
 - looked at a range of mostly literary documents from Medieval Compendium
 - hard to conclusively date and locate
 - coverage patchy and each data point represents one document
- Anthology of Chancery English:
 - collection of 241 documents from Royal and government business
 - largely centred around London, but some from other parts of the country
 - from 1417 to 1462

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Middle English Local Documents corpus (MELD)

- University of Stavanger
- Stenroos, Thengs and Bergstrøm (2017)
- Transcriptions of large numbers of documents (over 2000) ranging in time from 1400 to 1525
- Initial release for 12 Eastern counties
- 571 legal documents, from accounts and leases to letters and wills
- Not evenly distributed across counties

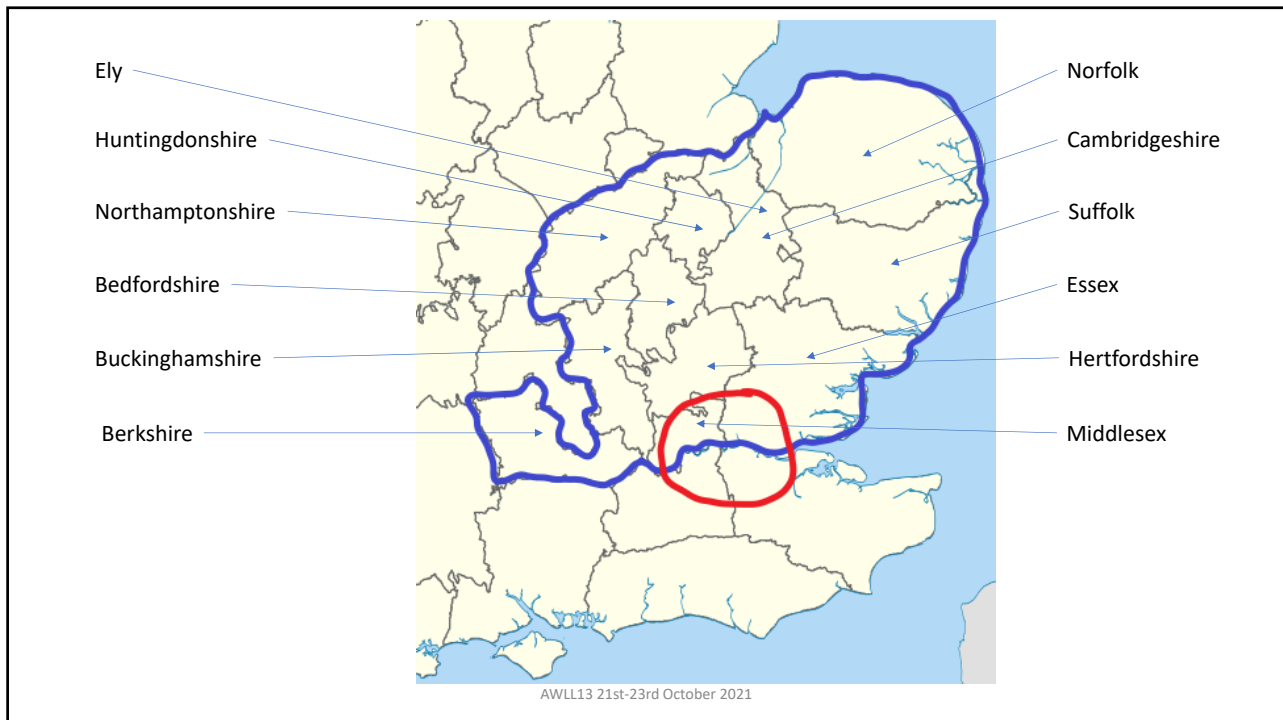
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Documents by county

County	Number of docs
Cambridgeshire	158
Middlesex	81
Norfolk	81
Suffolk	56
Berkshire	43
Essex	32
Northamptonshire	32
Hertfordshire	30
Buckinghamshire	29
Bedfordshire	20
Huntingdonshire	5
Ely	4

- Some comparisons include all twelve counties

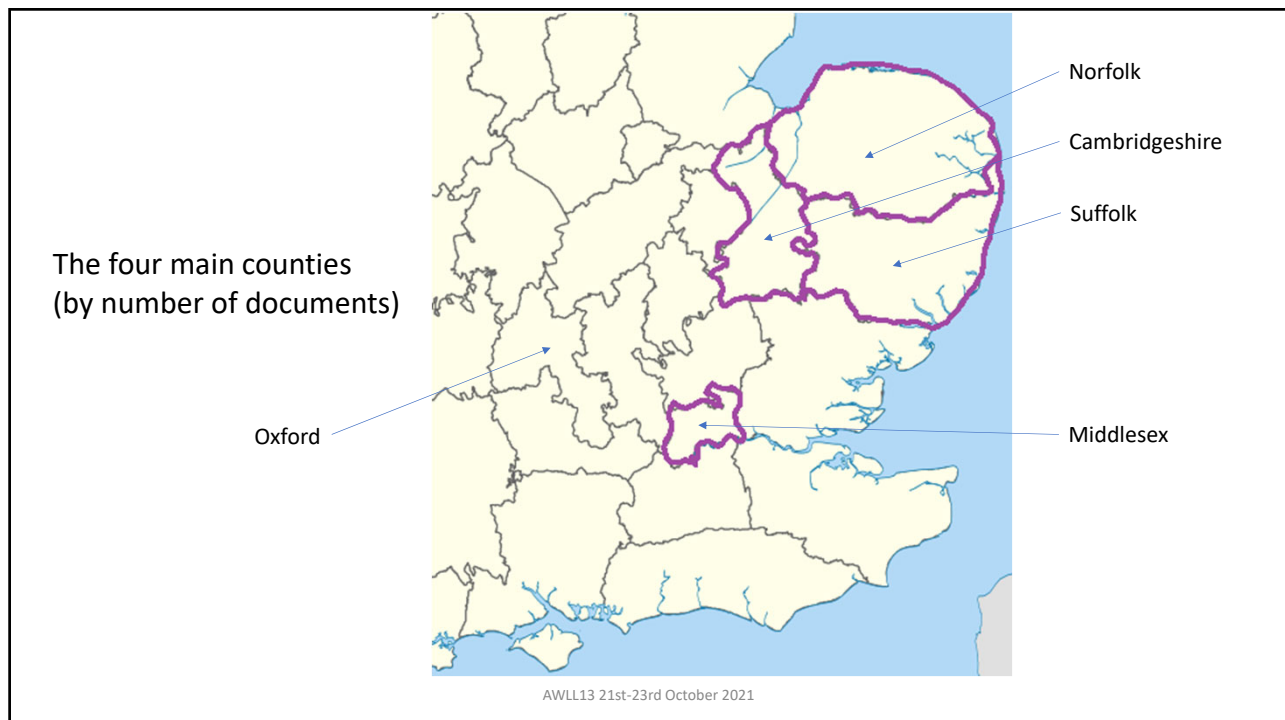
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- Some comparisons include all twelve counties
- When looking at more detail, only top four included

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Said

- Analysis of spelling of *said*
- Very common in legal documents (e.g. *the said William Smith, aforesaid*)
- Irregular spelling follows *pay~paid* and *lay~laid*
- Also irregular pronunciation: /sɛd/ (and in *says* – /sɛz/)
- Previous work examines use of digraphs, not **which digraph**
- Crystal (2004) describes use of <said>, <seid>, <sayd>
 - Chancery: “*saide* rather than *seide*”
- OED has 40 different spellings covering the time range
- MED* has 25, but some regional

* Middle English Dictionary

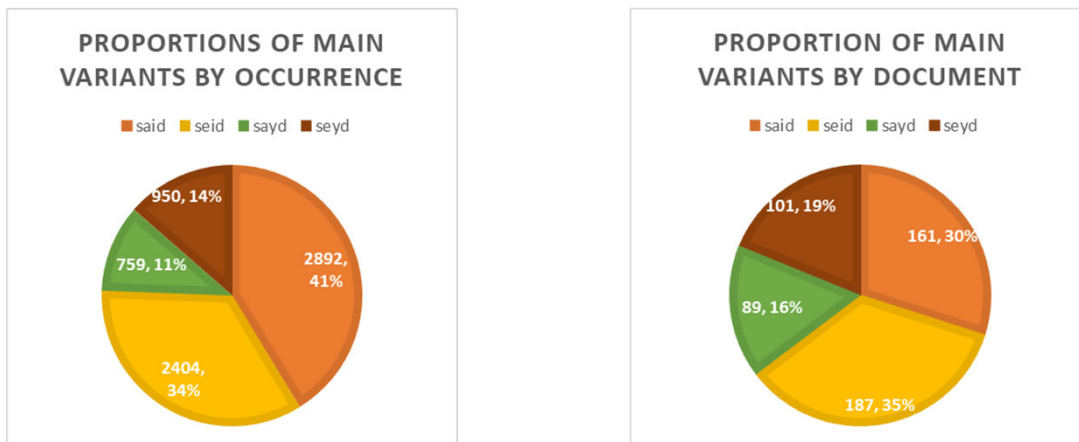
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Four main variants

Just over 7000 occurrences of *said*.

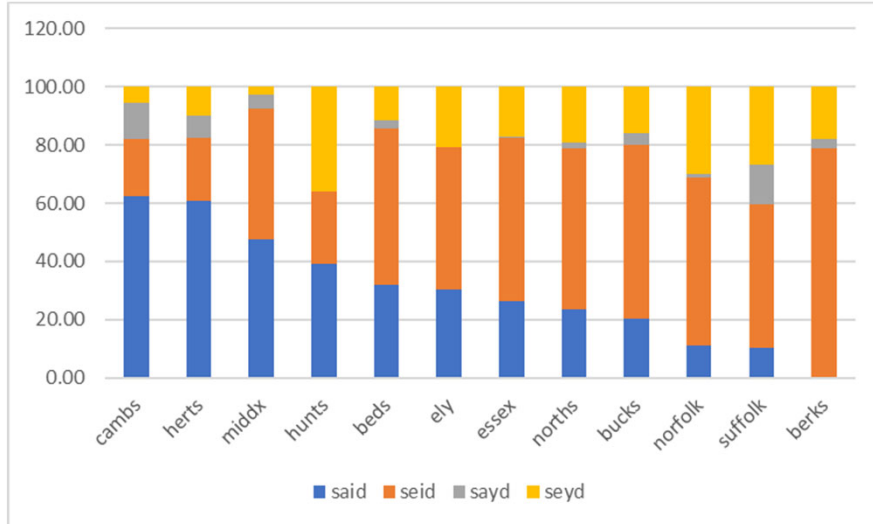
All but 14 were one of four variants: <said>, <seid>, <sayd> and <seyd>.



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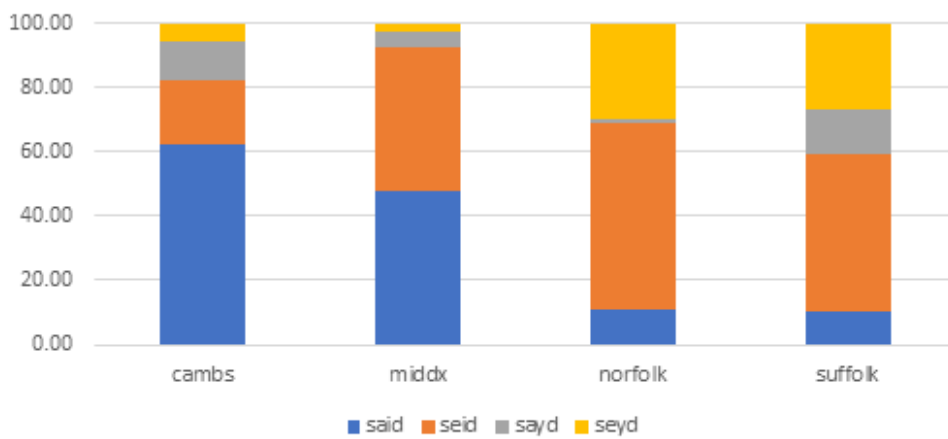
Variants in all counties



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Variants in top four counties



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Multiple variants within a document

No of variants	Docs	Proportion
1	306	73%
2	99	24%
3	10	2%
4	2	<1%

- Over a quarter had more than one variant
- Two documents had all four main variants
- Where two variants, 89% of pairs are as expected:
 - <said>/<seid>
 - <said>/<sayd>
 - <seid>/<seyd>

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Variants across time

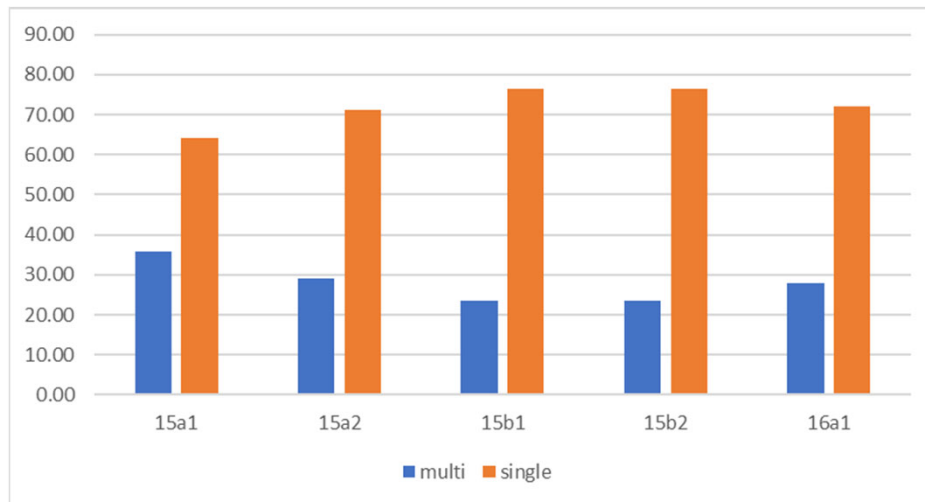
- Expect steady increase in use of modern standard variant
- Documents dated and divided into 25-year periods
- Very different numbers of documents in different periods

Period	Years	total docs
15a1	1406-45	18
15a2	1425-49	40
15b1	1450-74	85
15b2	1475-99	68
16a1	1500-1524	198

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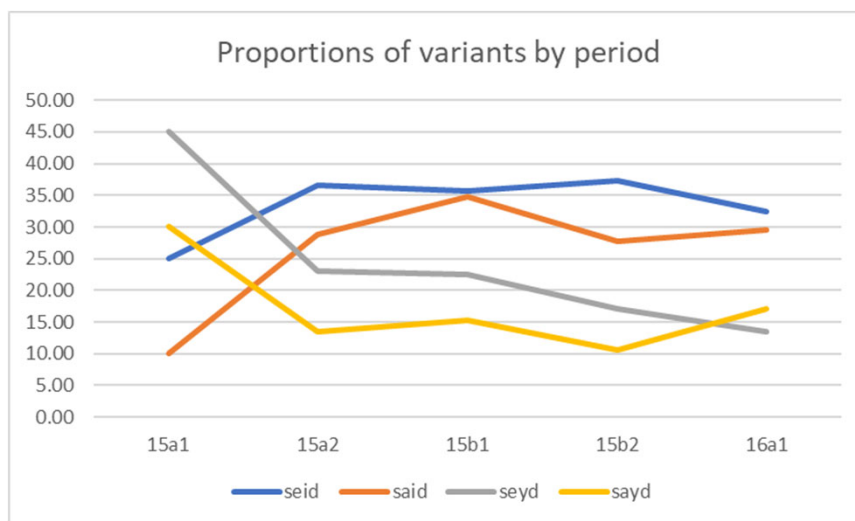
Documents with multiple variants



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Change in use of variants



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Conclusions

- MELD corpus allows fine grained study of spelling variants across space and time within this period
- Modern variant used much more in Cambs and Middx throughout the period
- Change across period in variants and multiple variants within documents small
- Next steps:
 - Comparison with other words with same pronunciation/spelling
 - more extensive comparison across country, especially Oxford and midlands

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Thank you!

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