Middle English spelling: a North-South divide?

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Outline of talk

- Brief history of English spelling
- The question of Norman French influence
- The data: MELD
- The variable(s)
- Geographical findings
- Conclusions

(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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Norman French influence

- Growth in official English documents slow and with much multilingualism (c.f. Wright 2021)

- After 1066, Norman French used alongside Latin and increased use of English

- Some aspects of English spelling credited to French influence:
  - Loss of eth (ð), thorn (þ), wynn (ƿ), yogh (ȝ), ash (æ) and ethel (œ)
  - <cw> → <qu>
  - <sh> → <ch>
  - <y> → <i>
  - …

- Not always clear whether influence is from French or Latin

Norman French influence

- Hypothesis (hinted at in several places) that influence spread from South to North
- (Or, at least, took hold more rapidly in the South east than in the North or the West)
- Obvious geographical and social-political reasons
- BUT evidence that some modern standard forms were originally from North

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
- Mostly official documents, from accounts and leases to letters and wills
- Full orthographic transcriptions

Variables examined

- Three variables chosen:
  - <cw> → <qu>
  - <sh> → <ch>
  - <y> → <i>

- Initial findings:
  - <cw> → <qu>   no occurrences of <cw> in MELD
  - <sh> → <ch>   very few occurrences of <ch> and mostly in names Richard and Charles

- Decided to focus on <y>/<i>

- Also involved continuation of previous work ...

Previous work: *said* vowel variants

- Reported at AWLL13 (and Cahill, forthcoming)
- Four main variants: <ai>, <ei>, <ay>, <ey>
- Bergstrøm (2020) looked at <ai/ay> vs <ei/ey>
- <a> variants most used in North before spreading via Cambridge/London
- Overall <i> variants used more but geographical variation
- Is the spread of <ai> and <ei> over <ay> and <ey> related to French influence <y> → <i>?

Previous views on <y> vs <i>

- Largely ignored or assumed to be random variation

- "used interchangeably" (Upward and Davidson 2011)

- LALME (Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English):
  - Distinguishes <y> and <i> forms of *it, is, any* and *many*
  - Does not distinguish <y> and <i> forms of any verb suffixes (e.g. <-yng> vs <-ing>, <-yed> vs <-ied> etc.)

- Gorlach (1997: 36) "the use of <y> for <i> … was often determined by the easier legibility" (the "minim problem" in Gothic script)

- Upward and Davidson (2011) focus on French/Latin words with <i> which become <y> in Modern English (*estudier → study*)
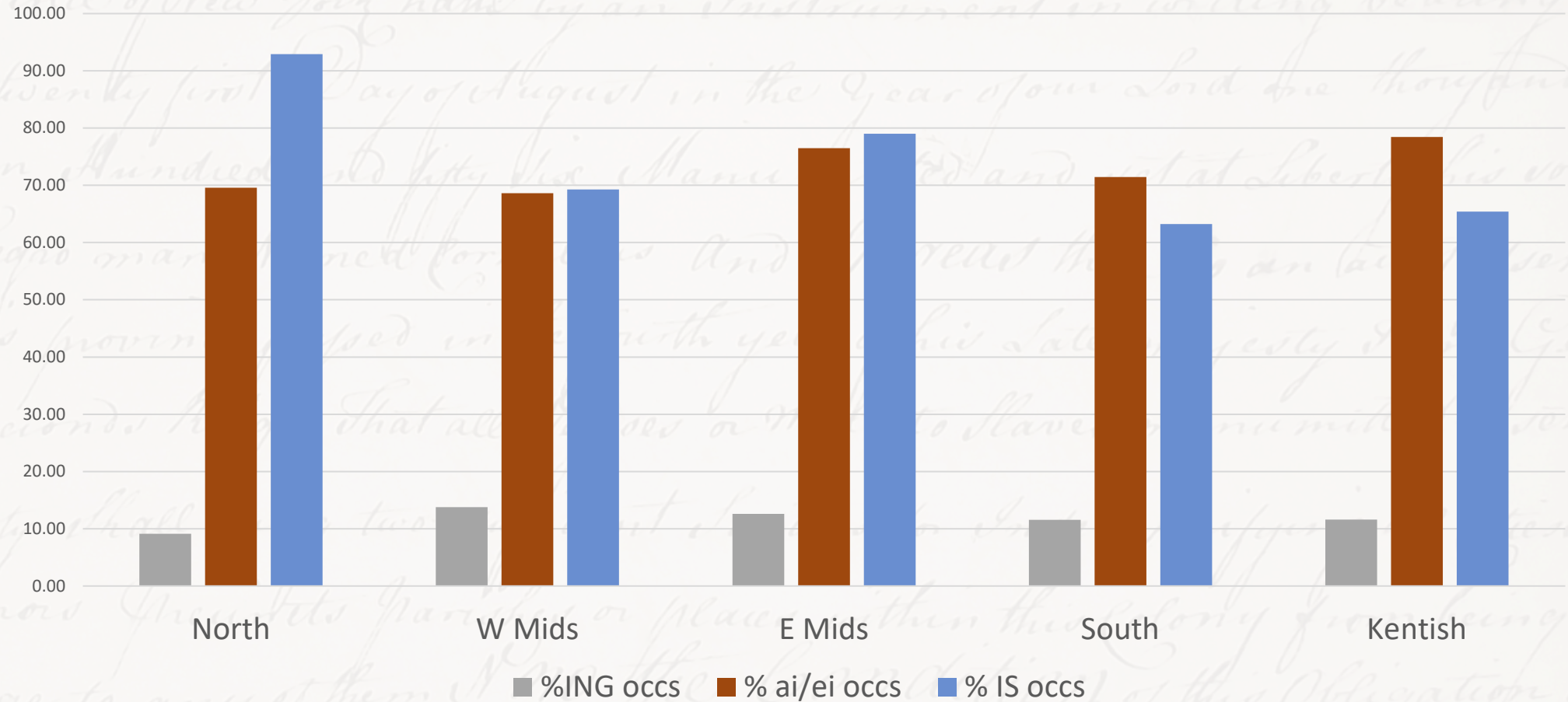
Variables (revisited)

- Wider geographical analysis of <ai/ei> vs <ay/ey>
  - *Said* Germanic origin but modern spelling analogous with French *paid*
- Analysis of <-ing> vs <-yng>
  - Extremely common, so lots of data
  - Inflectional suffix with Germanic origin
  - Subject to minim problem (with adjacent <n>)
- Analysis of <is> vs <ys>
  - Also extremely common
  - Auxiliary verb
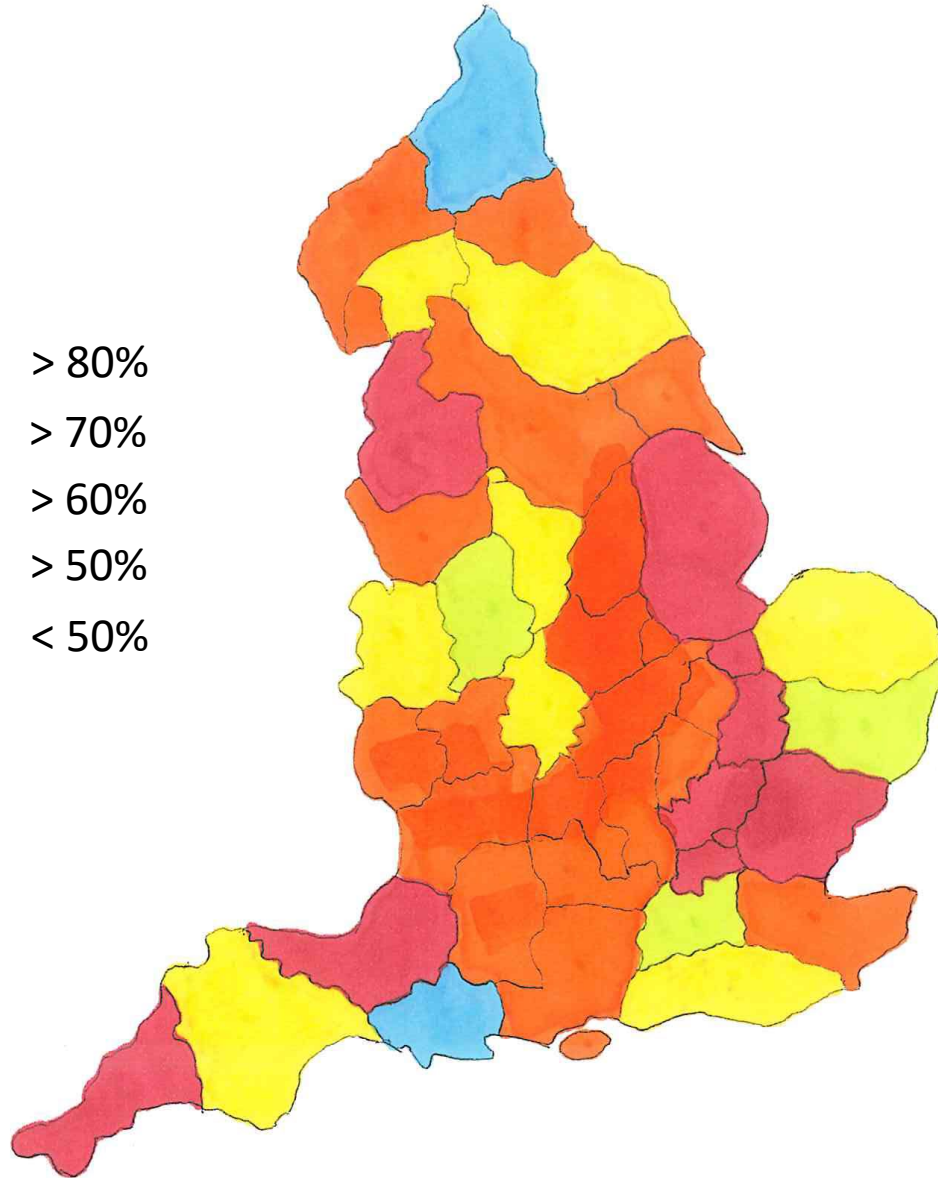 - Also Germanic origin

Results: overall

- Across the country:

	said	*is*	*-ing*
% <i>	73.76	79.71	12.36
% <y>	26.24	20.29	87.64

Results by dialect region

Results: *said*

🟥	> 80%
🟧	> 70%
🟨	> 60%
🟩	> 50%
🟦	< 50%

Results: *is*

🟥	> 80%
🟧	> 70%
🟨	> 60%
🟩	> 50%
🟦	< 50%

Results: *-ing*

> 20%

> 10%

> 5%

< 5%
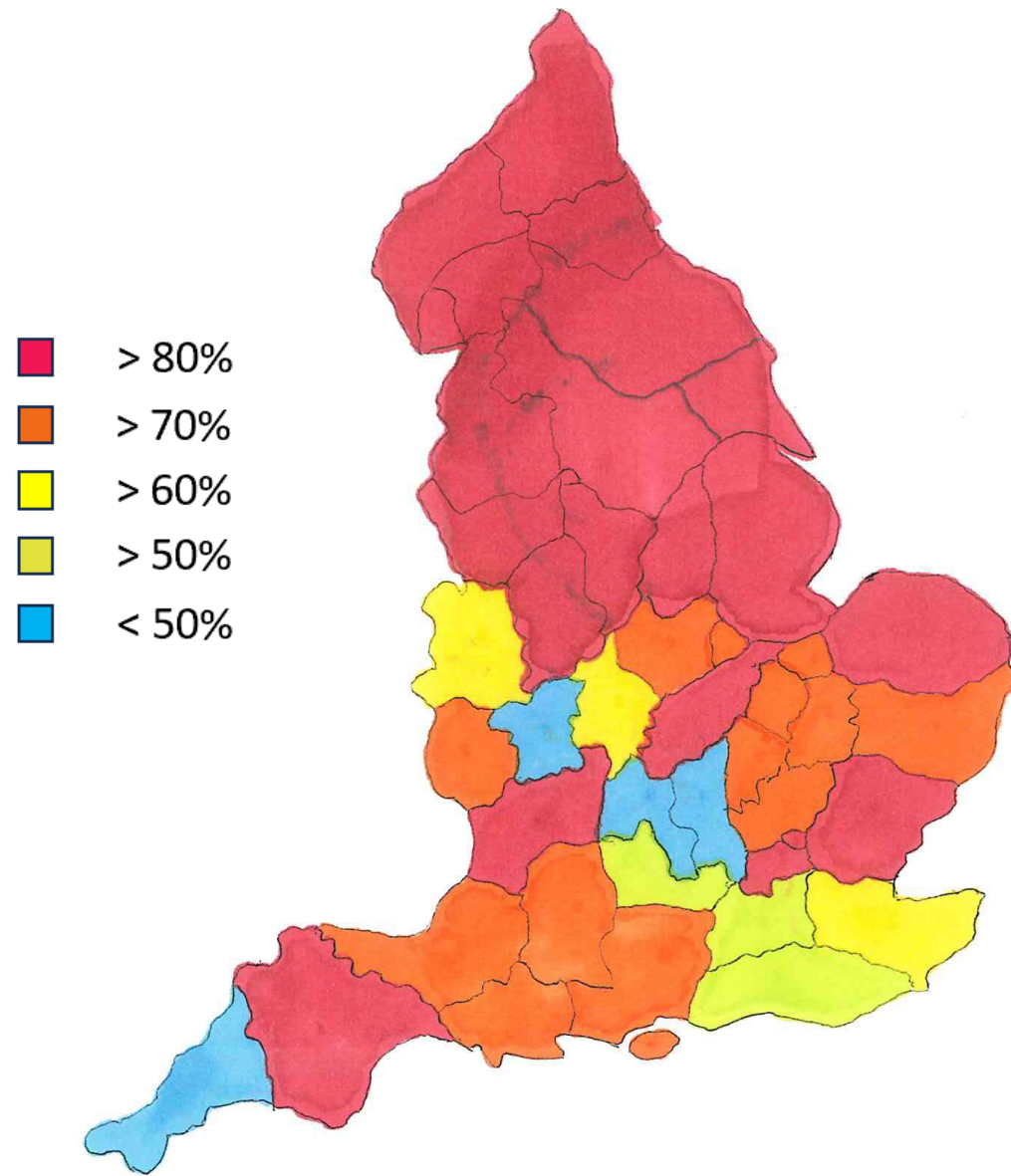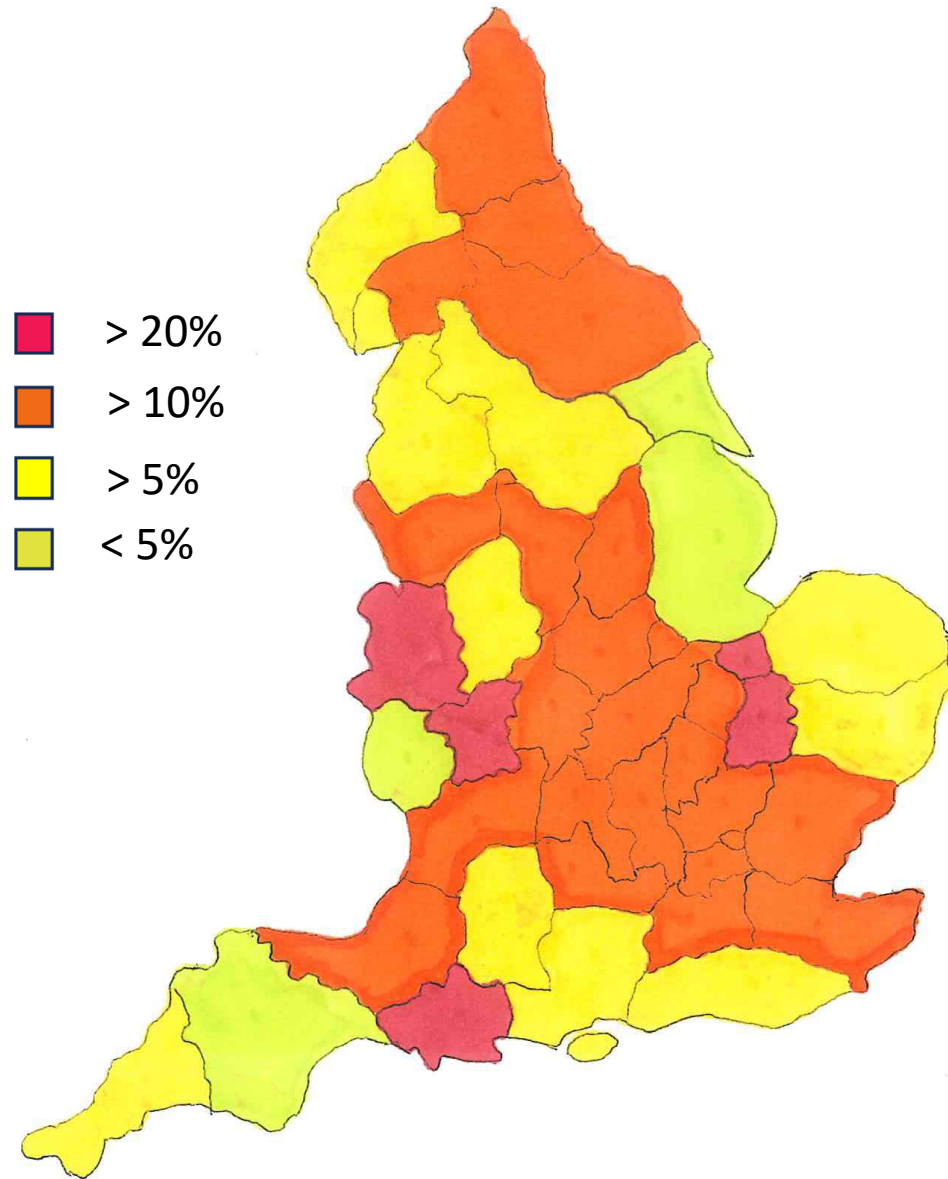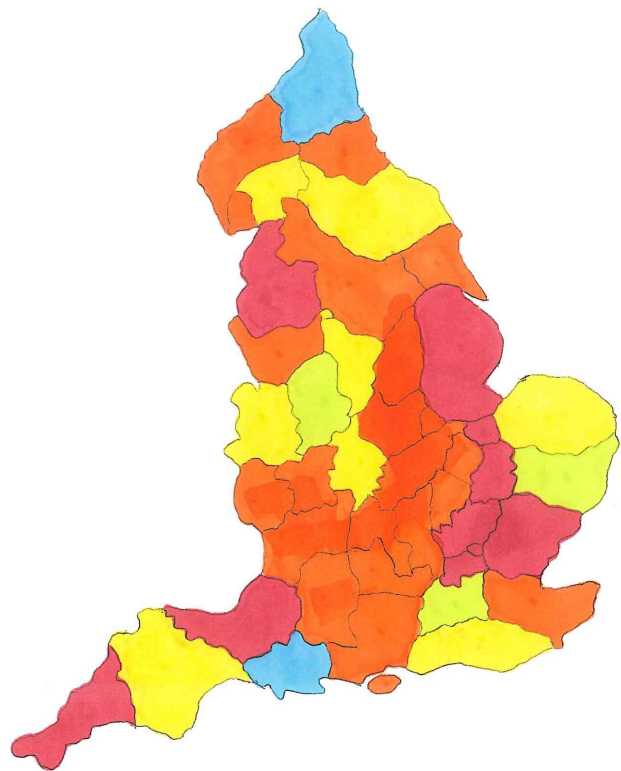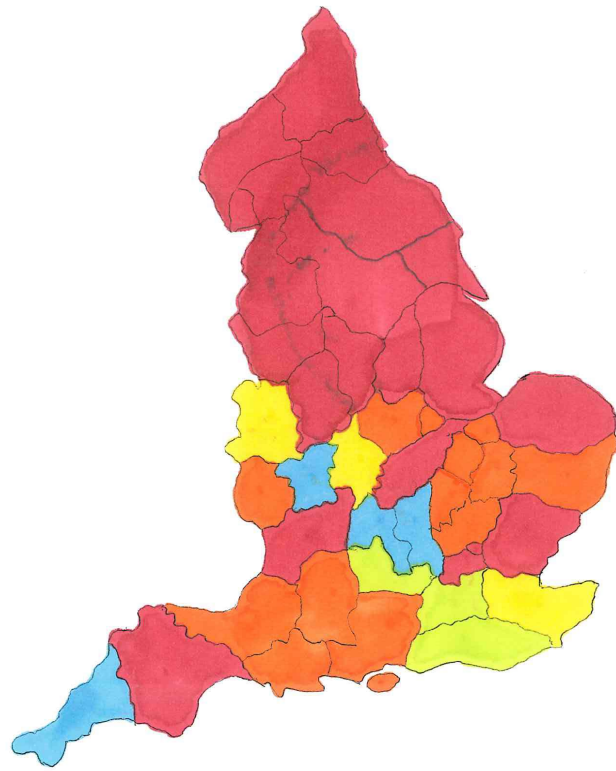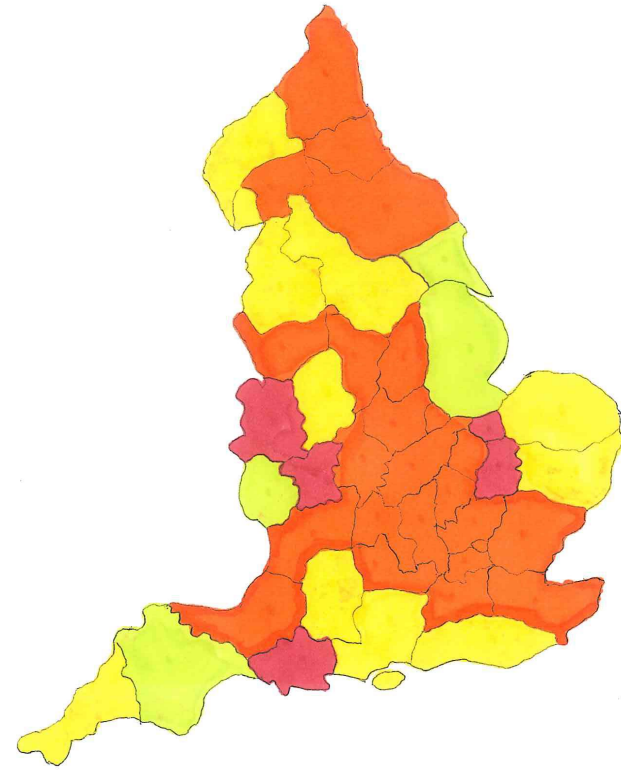
Comparison

said

is

-ing

Points to note

- Only variable where there is a reasonably clear North-South difference is *is*, but it is the North that has higher <is> use

- East Anglia (Norfolk and Suffolk) are out of line with East Midlands for *said* and *-ing*

- Devon and Cornwall very different (42 and 33 docs)

- East Midlands mostly favours <i> forms

- May also be greater use of <i> forms in West Saxon region

Conclusions

- -YNG is much more common across the board than YS or YT
  - Influence of "minim problem" continuing
  - No significant difference by region

- Strongest evidence of N-S split is for IS:
  - North/East higher <is> consistently
  - BUT South/West higher <is> with belt of lower <is> between
  - Opposite of what was proposed re Norman influence
  - Germanic influence stronger?

- Highest use of AI/EI is in East Midlands
  - But narrow definition and patchy
  - Romance influence stronger?
  - Analogy with *paid* (from French)

Conclusions

- The move to standardised spelling still happening in 1525
- Spread of eventual standard different for different features
- No evidence of single regional variety being accepted
- Various uses of <i> and <y> may have been influenced separately
- Still appears that the minim problem carries weight

Thank You!

References

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