# How many ways can you spell that?
## Intra-document variation in Middle English documents

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The standardisation of English spelling happened over a long period, probably beginning some time during the thirteenth century. An accepted set of spelling conventions had more or less been established by the middle of the eighteenth century, when Johnson published his dictionary, using mostly the forms we still use today. Exactly how the process progressed and spread, however, is still the matter of some debate.

Cahill (2023) described an analysis of the MELD corpus of local administrative documents dating between 1399 and 1525 (Stenroos et al 2017). This analysis showed regional differences in the forms used but also, surprisingly, showed that the acceptance that there should be a single spelling for each word did not appear to have been established by the latest documents, which date from the first quarter of the sixteenth century. This is indicated by continued intra-document variation in spellings.

In this paper, we make a comparison between the documentary texts in the MELD corpus and the wider range of genres of texts available in the MEG-C corpus (Middle English Grammar). Following Stenroos's (findings that certain developments in English spelling (e.g. the loss of characters such as thorn) appear to have progressed faster in documentary texts than in literary texts, we hypothesise that the non-documentary texts in MEG-C will, similarly, show a slower move towards eliminating intra-document variant spellings for the same word.

Provisional findings indeed support this hypothesis, with 58% of texts showing only a single variant of the words studied, compared to 73% in the documentary texts. This should be viewed with caution, due to a slightly earlier time period being involved, so further comparisons, taking into account exact timings, locations as well as additional variables will be presented, giving the clearest picture to date of this particular feature of spelling standardisation.

"Middle English Grammar" Manuscripts Online (www.dhi.ac.uk, version 1.0, 20 June 2025),
https://www.dhi.ac.uk/manuscriptsonline/resources/mg/

Stenroos, Merja (2020) Regional variation and supralocalization in late medieval English, in Stenroos and Thengs (eds. 2020), pp. 95-128.

Stenroos, Merja, Kjetil V. Thengs and Geir Bergstrøm (2017), *A Corpus of Middle English Local Documents (MELD), version 2017.1*. University of Stavanger. http://www.uis.no/meld (Accessed: 31 December 2020).