CoPaDocs-UK: A New Data Source for the Study of Late Modern English 'from Below'

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To begin with, this paper presents the *Corpus of Patient Documents-UK* (Mader 2025), an unpublished sister corpus of the German CoPaDocs (http://copadocs.de, Schiegg 2022). Transcribed diplomatically from original manuscripts, CoPaDocs-UK contains nearly 650 letters (c.220,000 running words) written by over 250 patients in seven psychiatric hospitals across England and the Scottish central belt during the period c.1840–1920. These 'patient letters', addressed to staff or recipients outside the hospitals, were withheld and filed in casebooks, remaining largely unnoticed until recently. In addition to patient letters, the corpus contains another c.140 ego-documents written by patients and their relatives. Offering a rare glimpse into language use by non-public 'ordinary' people from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds, CoPaDocs-UK constitutes a valuable addition to the available corpora of Late Modern English, which leave the period after 1840 virtually undocumented in terms of correspondence data 'from below' (cf. Elspaß 2005).

The second part of this paper presents a corpus-linguistic case study based on patient letters from CoPaDocs-UK looking at apostrophe usage in nominal genitives (e.g., *God's word* versus *Gods word*). While Calle-Martín & Pacheco-Franco (2024: 10–11) found apostrophised genitives practically categorical by the nineteenth century in ARCHER 3.2, CoPaDocs-UK shows a contrasting trend: non-apostrophised forms slightly outnumber apostrophised ones (371 versus 410). To better understand this discrepancy, my study explores language-internal factors (e.g., singular/plural nouns, /z/-final nouns) and writer variables (e.g., writing experience) influencing this distribution. Using mixed methods, I analyse macro and micro-level variation with descriptive statistics and statistical models to elucidate these patterns.

References

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