Where did *wer* go? Lexical variation and change in third-person male adult noun referents in Old English and Middle English

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Third-person male adult noun referents

e.g., man, guy, dude, bloke, chap, fella, gent, gentleman, geezer

Examples from the Spoken British National Corpus (BNC2014)

(1) (a) he is quite a big **dude**

(b) he's a big **bloke**

(c) he's a big **guy**

(d) he's a big **fella**, aint he?

(e) Schwarzenegger […] mm you know that big **chap**?

Previous Research

- Research on **Present Day English**

  (Franco & Tagliamonte, 2021; Tagliamonte, 2022)

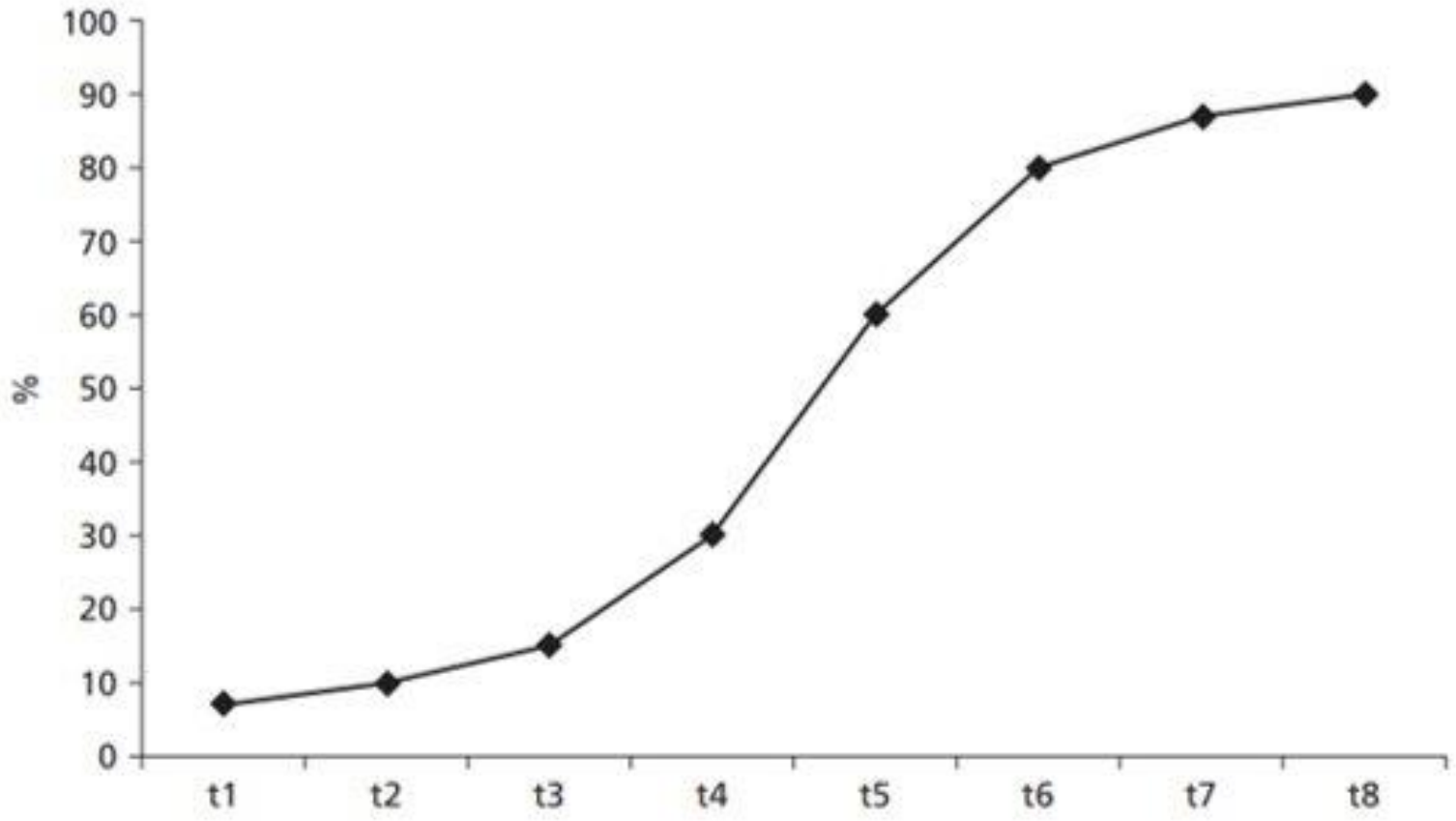
- **Documentation** of variants in **Old English** and **Middle English**

  (Stenroos, 2002; Kleparski, 2003, 2005; Grygiel, 2006; Elsweiler, 2011)

- **Little information on frequency changes** in early English

- **Unclear how this semantic field** has **evolved over time**

S-curve

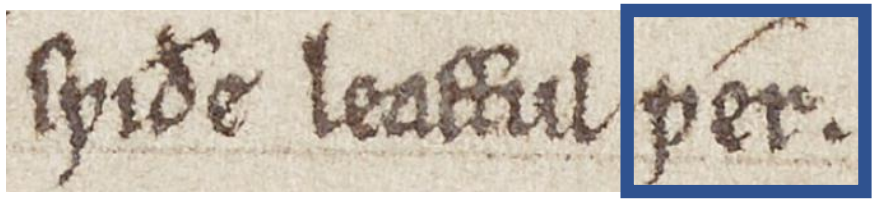


- One of the **hallmarks** of **linguistic change**
- **Incoming forms** adopted at a rate of **slow**, to **fast**, to **slow**

(Weinreich et al., 1968: 113-114; Bailey, 1973:77)

Present vs. Past

- Comparison of **current system** (e.g., *man*, *guy*) with **earlier** stages of English (e.g., *wer*) clearly show change within this semantic field



swiðe leaffull wer

‘very faithful man’

[Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 343, fol. 131v]

- Does lexical change within this onomasiological set follow s-curve pattern?

S-curve

- S-curve patterns are **expected** for **lexical change**

  (e.g., Blythe & Croft, 2012:278-279; Chambers, 2002:361)

- However, **previous s-curve patterns** have been **modeled predominantly** on:
  - **phonetic features** (e.g., Labov, 1994)
  - **grammatical features** (e.g., Nevalainen, 2015)
  - **discourse-pragmatic features** (e.g., Tagliamonte & Smith, 2021)

S-curve

- S-curve patterns for **lexical change** can be found in the **literature** (e.g., Chamber, 1995)
- However, these are usually based on **apparent time** as opposed to **real time data**
- Recent work on "**short-term high density lexical change**" (approx. one month) found evidence of **s-shaped patterns** for several "emerging words" (Grieve et al., 2017)

Research Questions

1) What is the **distribution** of **third-person male adult noun referents** in **Old** and **Middle English**?

2) Based on the extant metadata, is there any evidence to suggest that the use of third-person male adult noun referents was **conditioned**, **constrained**, or **influenced** by **any attested factors of variation**?

Semantic field in Old English

According to ***A Thesaurus of Old English***:

e.g., ceorl, carlmon, freca, folcagende, folcwer, guma, gumrinc, hæle, hyse, leod, mæcg, man, scealc, wer, woruldman, wiga, wæpnedmann, wæpenmann

- **Some** reportedly **restricted** to **poetry** (e.g., *gumrinc*)
- Others occur in both **prose** and **verse** texts (e.g., *wer*)

(Stenroos, 2002:382-383; Kleparski, 2003:49)

Semantic field in Middle English

- By Middle English, **only half of the Germanic words for 'man'** (e.g., *beorn*, *cerl*, *freca*, *guma*, *man*, *rinc*, *scealc*, *secg*) are reported to have **remained in use**
- **Contact** with **Anglo-Norman** led to new variants through lexical borrowing (e.g., *sire* 'man')
- The word ***gentleman*** emerged during Middle English (compounding French ***gentil*** + Germanic ***mon*** 'man')

(Stenroos, 2002)

Methodology

Data:

- ***Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*** (e.g., Rissanen et al., 1991)
  - Contains metadata for:
    - *text type* (prose, verse)
    - *origin* (Latin-based or original composition)
    - *time* (O1, O2, O3, O4, M1, M2, M3 etc)
- Middle English data were supplemented with texts from Sisam (1928)

Methodology

Envelope of variation:

- List of variants compiled from
  - Previous literature (e.g., Stenroos, 2002; Grygiel, 2006)
  - Dictionaries (e.g., *Bosworth-Toller*; *OED; MED*)
  - Thesauruses (e.g., *The Historical Thesaurus of English; A Thesaurus of Old English*)
- List of spelling variants and inflectional forms compiled and subsequently searched for in the corpus

Methodology

Envelope of variation:

- Downloaded and **manually inspected** for removal of functionally non-equivalent/non-comparable instances
- Variable context circumscribed to **male adult referents**
- Instances of ambiguity were removed from pool of analysis
- Only **instances** that unambiguously **referred** to a **male adult** were **included**

Man in Old English

Man can have a **gender-specific meaning** (i.e., male) but it also **additional functions** too:

- Indefinite pronoun (‘one’)
- Gender-inclusive (‘person’)
- Human referent (‘human’)

(cf. Raumolin-Brunberg & Kahlas-Tarkka, 1997; Curzan, 2003; Rauer, 2017)

Indefinite use of *MAN*

Old English:

(2) *He sæde þæt he æt sumum cirre wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge, oþþe hwæðer* ***ænig mon*** *be norðan þæm westenne bude*

‘He said that he wanted to find out how long the land is northward, or whether any one (lit. man) lived to the north of the wasteland’

[*Ohthere & Wulfstan*, 950-1050]

Gender-inclusive/Human use of *MAN*

Old English:

(3) *on ðam sixtan dæge he gesceop eal deorcynn 7 ealle nytenu þe on feower fotum gað 7 þa* ***twegen men*** ***Adam & Euan***

‘on the sixth day he created all animals and all four-footed creatures, and the two humans, Adam and Eve’

[*De Temporibus Anni*, 950-1050]

Gender-specific use of *MAN*

Old English:

(4) *on þære fyrde wæron þe ferdon fram Egipte*

on the army were which traveled from Egypt

sixhund þusend ***manna*** *butan* ***wifum*** *7* ***cildum***

six hundred thousand men except woman and children

‘In that army, there were 600,000 men who traveled from Egypt, that number does not include women and children’

[*Ælfric’s Letter to Sigeweard*, 1050-1150]

Methodology

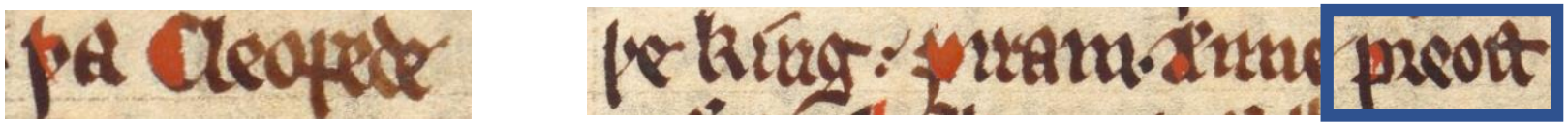
Envelope of variation:

- Only instances that unambiguously referred to a male adult were included
- How was this done?
  - Presence of names
  - Socio-historical context
  - Translations in Latin (when possible)

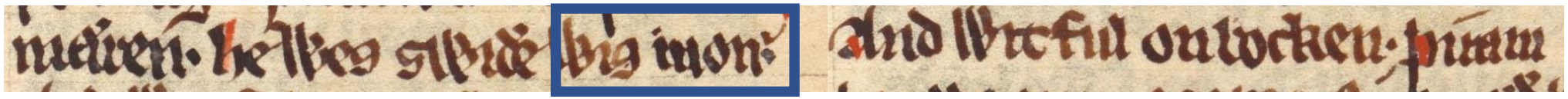
Socio-historical context

Old English:

(5) *þa cleopede þe king Piram, ænne* ***preost***



mæren he wes swiðe wis ***mon*** *and witful on bokken*



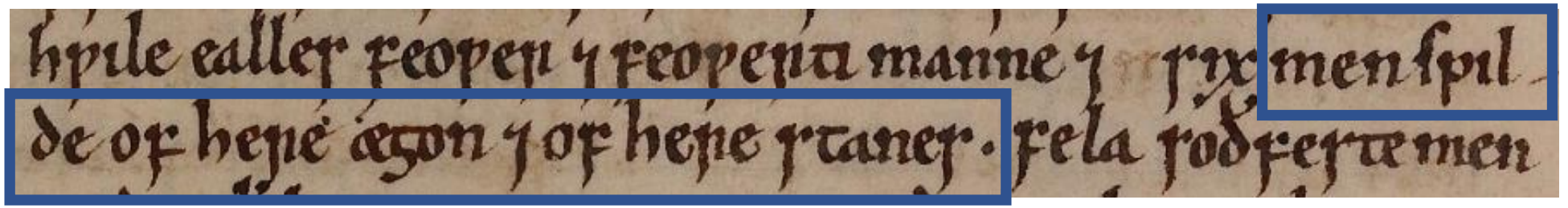
‘Then the king summoned the Priam, a famous priest, he was a very wise and well-read man’

[*Layamon*, 950-1050, *Cotton MS Caligula A IX, f.129r*]

Context: *man*

Middle English:

(6) ***six men*** *spilde here ægon 7 of here stanes*



‘six **men** had their testicles castrated and their eyes removed’

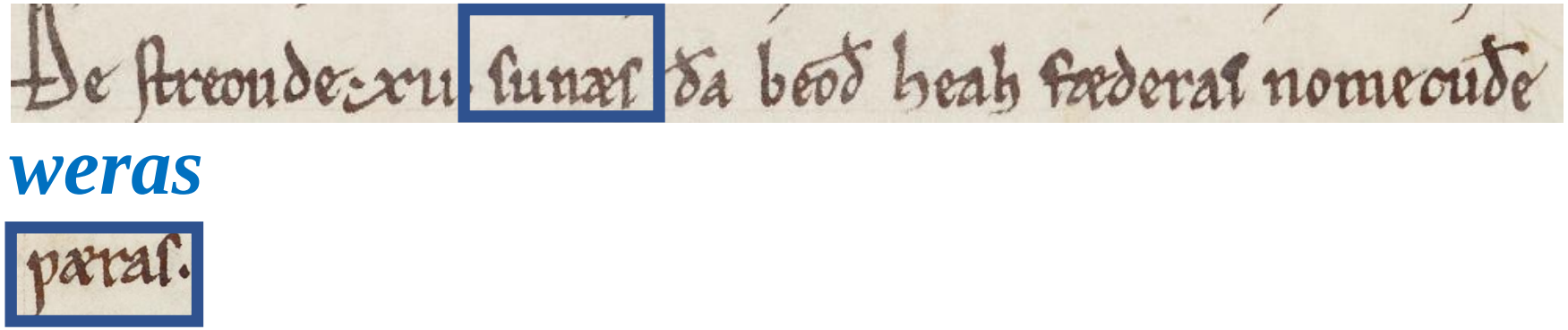
[Peterborough Chronicle 1150-1250, *Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 636*]

N.B. *spilde* ‘deprived of [body part]’ (MED, *n*)

Context: *wer*

Old English:

(7) *se gestrynde twelf* ***suna*** *þa beoð heah fæderas nomecuðe*



‘he begot/had twelves **sons**, who are the Patriarchs, famous **men**’

[Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 343, fol. 130r]

N.B. *gestrīnan* ‘to obain/get/acquire/procreate’ (Bosworth-Toller, *vb*)

Contexts not included

Examples:

- **Indefinite pronoun**
  - (e.g., *forþam nat nænig man* ‘therefore, nobody knows’)
- **Vocatives of address**
  - (e.g., *ne sorga, snotor guma* ‘don’t worry, wise man’)
- **Semantically non-equivalent meanings:**
  - *mān* ‘crime’
  - *wer* - *wergild* (man + money) ‘compensation tariff’
  - ‘husband’ (e.g., *ceorl 7 wif* suggest marital relation – *ceorlian/wifian* ‘to take a husband/wife’)

Results

Old English data

Distribution of variants in Old English

Variants	*n*	%
wer	266	42.2
man	86	13.6
guma	85	13.5
secg	31	4.9
beorn	29	4.6
hæle[*þ*]	18	2.9
rinc	18	2.9
freca	9	1.4
wæpned	9	1.4
ceorl	8	1.3
wæpman	6	1.0
Other	66	10.4
Total	631	100

- **631** tokens
- **25** attested variants
- ***Wer*** was the **most frequent**

Distribution of OE variants by Text Type

Variants	Prose		Verse	
	n	%	*n*	%
wer	204	63.6	62	19.7
man	72	22.4	14	4.4
guma	7	2.2	78	25
secg	2	.6	29	9.2
beorn	0	0	29	9.2
ceorl	2	.6	6	1.9
freca	0	0	9	2.9
rinc	0	0	18	5.7
hæle[*þ*]	0	0	18	5.7
wæpned	8	2.5	1	.3
wæpman	6	1.9	0	0
Other	16	6.2	50	16
Total	317	100	314	100

- Different text types favored different variants
- ***Wer*** (+**prose**)
- ***Guma*** (+**verse**)

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wæpned	8	2.5	1	.3
wæpman	6	1.9	0	0
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- **Type-Token Ratio** indicated a **wider range of variants** were used in **verse**

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hæle[*þ*]	0	0	18	5.7
wæpned	8	2.5	1	.3
wæpman	6	1.9	0	0
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Total	317	100	314	100

- **Of those variants in verse,** 76% (*n* = 239) alliterated with words in proximity

Distribution of OE variants by Text Type

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wer	204	63.6	62	19.7
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guma	7	2.2	78	25
secg	2	.6	29	9.2
beorn	0	0	29	9.2
ceorl	2	.6	6	1.9
freca	0	0	9	2.9
rinc	0	0	18	5.7
hæle[*þ*]	0	0	18	5.7
wæpned	8	2.5	1	.3
wæpman	6	1.9	0	0
Other	16	6.2	50	16
Total	317	100	314	100

- **Chi-Square** indicated alliteration had a significant effect on variation in verse texts ($p < .001$)
- **Alliterative demands** in verse creates the need for wide range of variants

Distribution of OE variants by Origin

Variants	Non-translated		Translated	
	n	%	*n*	%
wer	115	28.1	151	68.3
man	50	12.2	36	15.8
guma	72	17.6	13	5.9
secg	30	7.3	1	.5
beorn	25	6.1	4	1.8
ceorl	7	1.7	1	.5
freca	9	2.2	0	0
rinc	15	3.7	3	1.4
hæle[*þ*]	17	4.1	0	0
wæpned	6	1.5	3	1.4
wæpman	5	1.2	1	.5
Other	58	14.3	9	3.9
Total	409	100	222	100

- non-translated texts contained **a wider a range of variants** than translated texts
- In translated texts, *wer* made up 68.3% of the semantic field.

Multivariate Analysis

- Mixed effects logistic regression in *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009)
  - Dependent variable coded binomially: *wer* vs. all other variants
  - Linguistic:
    - Alliteration (when present)
  - External:
    - Text type [prose, verse]
    - Text origin [translated, not-translated]
    - Time [O2, O3, O4, M1, M2, M3]

Logistic regression of the factors influencing the use of WER versus all other Old English variants

	n	%	FW
FIXED EFFECTS			
TIME **			
O3	418	32.3	.70
O2	140	69.3	.50
O4	73	46.6	.34
Range			*36*
TEXT TYPE ***			
prose	317	64.4	.81
verse	314	19.7	.20
Range			*61*
TEXT ORIGIN **			
translated	222	68.0	.69
non-translated	409	28.1	.30
Range			*39*
RANDOM EFFECTS			
TEXT ID	*SD* = 2.12		
Total *n* = 631, Input = .453, Texts = 72, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$			

- All **three factors significantly** affected the choice to use ***wer*** **
- TIME (*wer* occurred more frequently in O2 than O4)
- Interaction effect of TIME and TEXT TYPE (making it appear that the decrease was not linear)
- Separate model was run on only the prose data. The decrease was linear

Middle English data

Distribution of variants in Middle English

Variants	*n*	%
man	141	57.3
kniȝt	33	13.4
gome	10	4.1
burne	8	3.3
shalk	6	2.4
beorn	5	2.0
freke	4	1.6
segge	4	1.6
cherl	3	1.2
hathel	3	1.2
wepmann	3	1.2
Other	26	10.7
Total	246	100

- **27 attested variants**
- ***Man*** was the number one variant
- *Wer* was attested only once as a ‘male adult’ referent in the dataset (*Ormulum*)
- Whenever *wer* occurred in non-equivalent contexts, it occurred in contexts where it meant ‘husband’

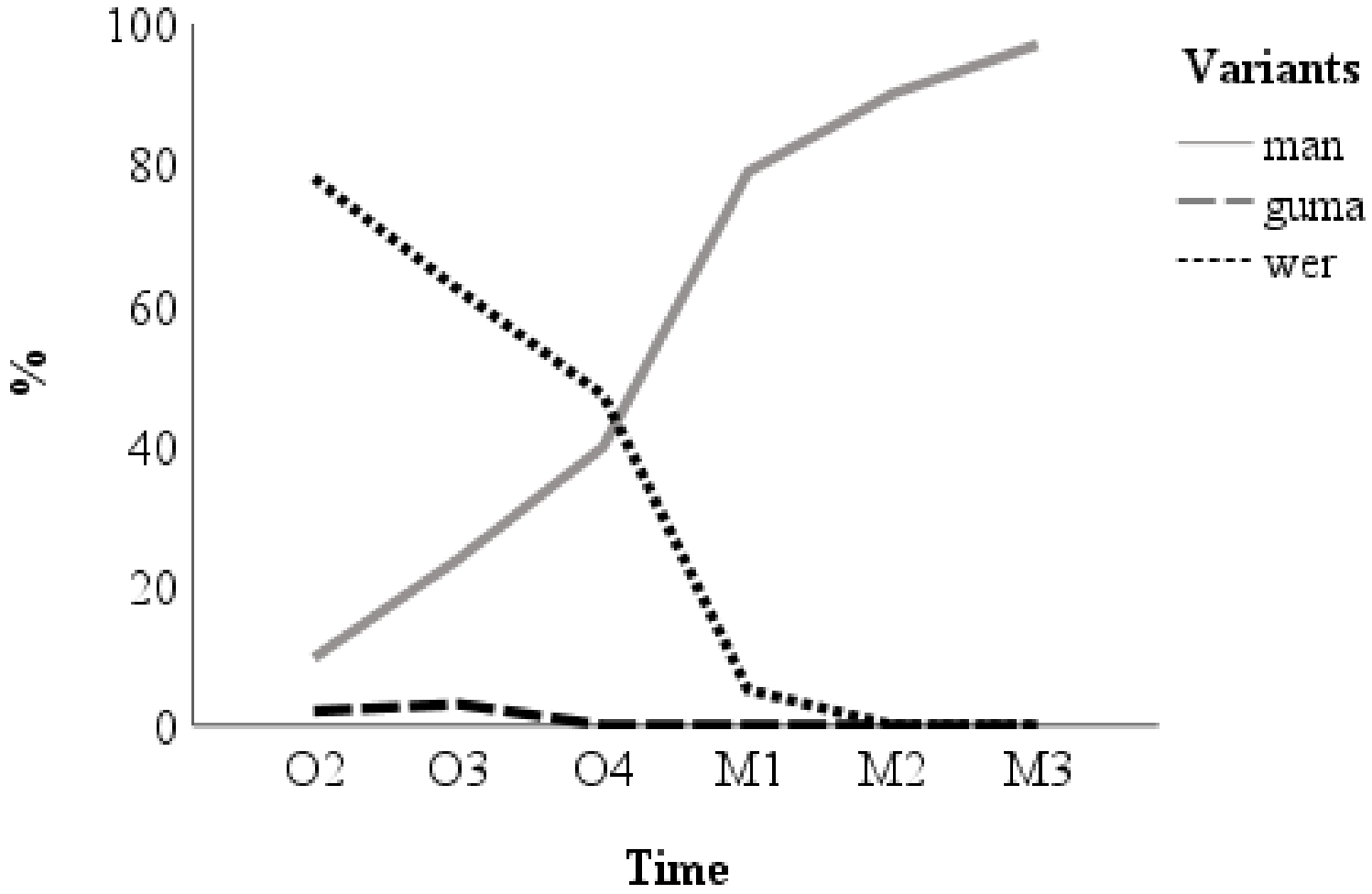
Logistic regression of the factors influencing the use of MAN versus all other Middle English variants

	n	%	FW
FIXED EFFECTS			
TIME **			
M3	77	55.8	.88
M1	126	53.2	.34
M2	43	72.1	.24
Range			*64*
TEXT TYPE ***			
prose	78	92.3	.84
verse	168	41.1	.16
Range			*68*
TEXT ORIGIN **			
translated	37	81.1	.62
non-translated	209	53.1	.37
Range			*25*
RANDOM EFFECTS			
TEXT ID	*SD* = 2.7		*n* = 20
Total *n* = 246, Input = .868 * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001			

- TIME was significant, with *man* occurring more frequently in M3 than M1
- *Man* occurred more frequently in prose than verse
- Like *wer*, it occurred more frequently in translated texts than non-translated texts

Changes from Old English to Middle English

Frequency of *wer*, *guma*, and *man* in Old and Middle English prose texts



Discussion

Discussion

1. ***Wer* was the most frequent variant for 'man' in Old English**
   - Over time it was **replaced** by ***man***
   - By **Middle English**, ***wer*** was **attested** only **once** referring to male adult
   - Other occurrences of *wer* were instances where it meant 'husband'
   - Interestingly, many lexical items belonging to this semantic field follow this trend (e.g., *fella – how's your fella*?)
2. **Replacement of *wer* with *man* follows a prototypical s-curve pattern**
   - This suggests that although change does not have to follow s-curve patterns (e.g., Kauhanen, 2017), **lexical change can follow s-curve patterns**.

Discussion

3. Linguistic and external factor influenced lexical choices

- Alliteration influenced choices in verse
- Text type and text origin significantly affected choices

Discussion

4. Why did *wer* disappear?

- Data show its **decrease** was **already underway** in **Old English**
- The "**Actuation Problem**" (Weinreich et al., 1968:102) **occludes** an **explanation** for the **causation** of this change took place
- However, one could **speculate** that contact with Anglo-Norman may accelerated this change
- ***Wer*** was likely **homophonous** with Norman French loanword ***werre*** **'war'** (*MED*, n.) which appears as early as 12th century texts
- In line with the "**homonymic clash**" proposed by M. L. Samuels (1972: 67-75)

Conclusion

- System of **third-person male adult noun referents** is a **dynamic** and **heterogeneous** one, with variants being replaced at different intervals in time
- Like in the present-day, **intra-** and **extralinguistic** factors **influence lexical choices**
- While **apparent-time studies** point to the **applicability** of **s-curve patterns** for **lexical change**, this study adds an important **diachronic dimension**

Many **thanks!**

Stratton, James, M. (forthcoming). Where did *wer* go? Lexical variation and change in third-person male adult noun referents in Old and Middle English. *Language Variation and Change*.

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References next slide

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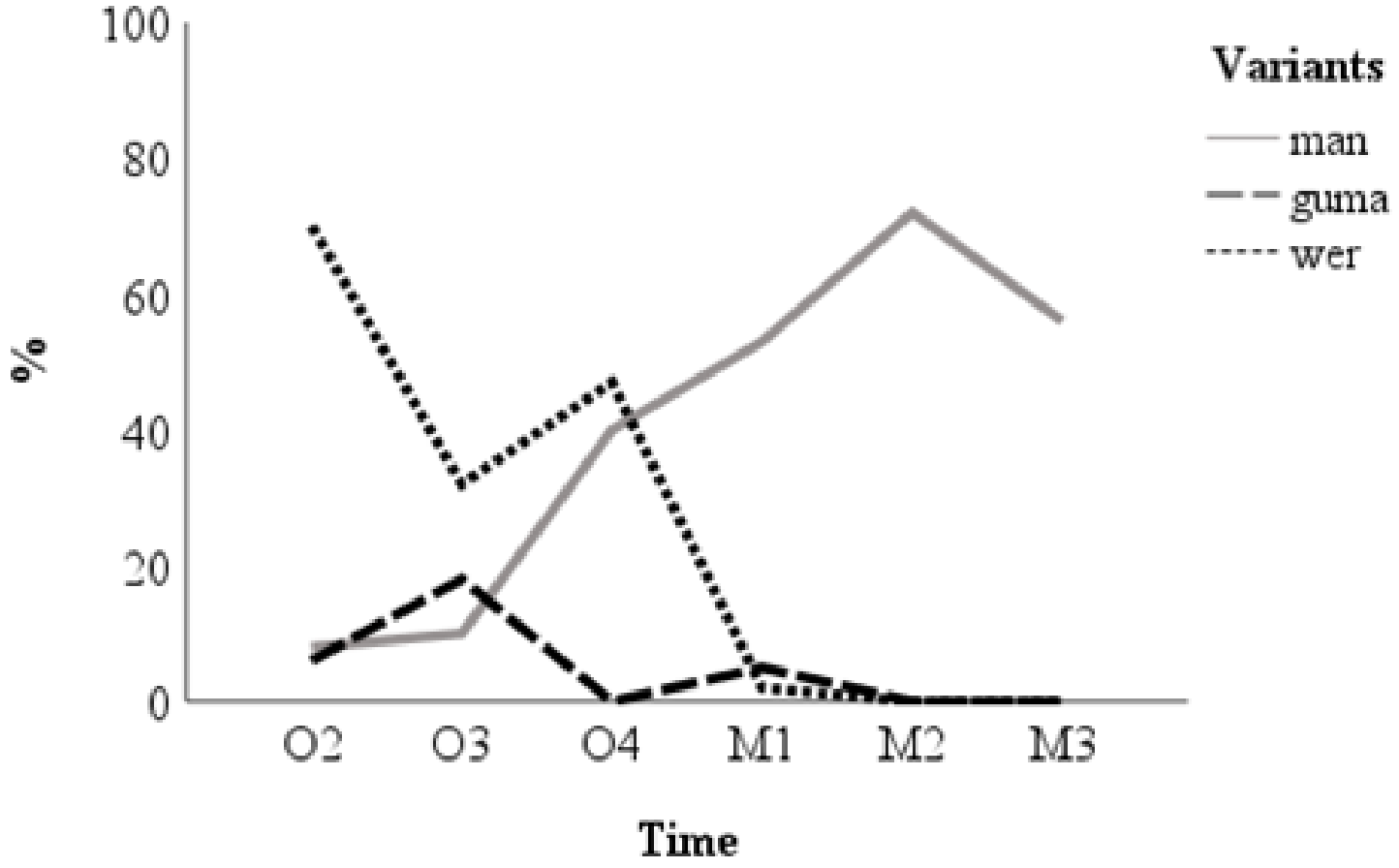
Appendix

The frequency of *wer*, *guma*, and *man* from Old English to Middle English in Verse Texts.



Example of *Wer*

(5) *Ond on ðone ylcan dæg Crist gereorde fif ðusenda*
and on the same day Christ fed five thousand
wera *hlafum ond of twam fixum,*
men.GEN.PL bread DAT.PL and of two fish.DAT.PL
eac ***wifum*** *ond* ***cildum*** *þara wæs ungerim*
also women DAT.PL and children DAT.PL, which was uncountable

‘And on that same day, Christ fed **5,000 men**, with loaves of bread and two fish. In addition, he **also** fed **women** and **children**, of which there were many’

[Old English Martyrology, 950-1050]

Presence of Names

Old English:

ða wæs ***Apollonius*** *gehaten sum iung* ***man*** *se wæs swiðe welig and snotor*

‘There was a young man called Apollonius who was very wealthy and wise”

[Apollonius of Tyre, 950-1050]

Translation from Latin

Middle English:

ne can þara idesa owðer gieta þurh gebedscipe ***beorna*** *neawest*

‘Neither of these women have slept with a **man** before’

[Genesis, 950-1050]

It is evident the *idesa* the *beorna* ‘men’ have not slept with are ‘men’ because of the Latin (*habeo duas filias, quae necdum cognoverunt* ***virum*** ‘I have two daughters who are yet to have known/slept with men’
Note. *Wer* is cognate with Latin *vir*, but the scribe used *beorn* instead (perhaps due to alliteration)

From *man* to *husband*

- This shift appears to be a common one
- This happened with *wer*

  ða [*þæt Latinus*] *hiere wer geascade*
  'when [Collantinus] her husband asked'

- Also
  - *guma* > *groom*
  - *ceorl* > 'married man' (adj. *ceorleas* 'unmarried', vrb. *ceorlian to take a husband*)
  - *man* > I now pronounce you man and wife
  - *fella* > *how's your fella*