

*The Functions of
Multilingual
Abbreviations in
Historical English, c'est
discussing Latin,
French, etc. in a long
diachrony*



Dr Alpo Honkapohja (Tallinn University)

Based on the article:

Honkapohja, Alpo and Imogen Marcus (2024) 'The long history of shortening: a diachronic analysis of abbreviation practices from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century', *English Language and Linguistics*, 28(1), pp. 43–71.

- **Working hypothesis:** Abbreviation is present in written texts from any period
- **Aim:** to provide a descriptive account of its developments, using a unified typology and corpora from the late Middle Ages to PDE
- **Today's talk:** focus on abbreviations tagged as Latin or French in our corpora

Abbreviations in writing guides

- Stylistic recommendations (see e.g. Williams 1981; Lang 2019)

Tätä nykyä kirjoitetussa kielessä käytetään yhä enemmän lyhenteitä. Niitä ovat erilaiset **kirjainyhdistelmät, lyhennetyt sanat ja sanojen sijasta käytettävät symbolit.** Monet tutut lyhenteet ovat käteviä ja tarpeellisiakin, mutta outojen ja liian monien lyhenteiden käyttö on häiritsevää. Kirjoittajan olisikin ajateltava lukijaa, jonka pitää ymmärtää lyhenne (Nurmi 2004: Kirjoittajan ABC).

[These days in written language, various kinds of abbreviations are increasingly common. They include various combinations of letters, abbreviated words and symbols used instead of words. Many familiar abbreviations are useful and even necessary, but using too many abbreviations is distracting. The writer should think about the reader, who has to understand the abbreviation]

Abbreviations in lexicology

- Some abbreviation types are listed as ‘minor word formation processes’ (e.g. Plag 2003, Stockwell & Minkova 2003, Bassac 2004, Bauer 2022, Lieber 2022).
 - Acronyms (read as a word): NATO
 - Initialisms (read letter by letter): CEO
 - Clippings:
 - Aeroplane > plane
 - Refrigerator > fridge
 - Expanded form no longer transparent:
 - Omnibus > bus, perambulator > pram
 - Spoken language:
 - Laboratory > lab, bicycle > bike

Abbreviations in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

- The 'first wave' of CMC research highlighted abbreviations (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420)
 - 'Netspeak' (Crystal 2001: 17)
 - 'Common features of digital writing' (Danet 2001: 17):
 - Abbreviations
 - Emoticons
 - Non-standard spellings
- The first wave of CMC studies has later faced criticism
- A school essay allegedly written exclusively in SMS abbreviations by a student (2003) – hoax?

My smmrhols wr CWOT, B4, we usd 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his
GF & 3:- @ kds FTF, ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.
Bt my Ps wr so (-:/ BC o 9/11 tht they dcdd 2 stay in SC0 &
spnd 2 wknd up N.
Up N, WUCIWUG - 0. I ws vvv brd in Mon. 0 bt baas &
^^^^^^.
AAR8, my Ps wr - they sd ICBW, & tht they wr ha-p 4 the
pc&qt... IDTS!! I wntd 2 go hm ASAP, 2C my m8s again.

Figure 28.2 Excerpt from a mass-mediatised homework assignment written in SMS style (2003)

However, if we turn back the clock some centuries...



CCAA (Germania Inferior), I.Köln 249



© RGM Köln, Foto: Kresimir Matijevic

Imp(erator) Nero Caesar Augustus / divi Claudi f(ilius)
Germanici Caesaris / n(epos) Tib(eri) Caesaris Aug(usti)
pron(epos) divi Aug(usti) abn(epos) / pontif(ex) max(imus)
trib(unicia) pot(estate) XII imp(erator) X co(n)s(ul) III
p(ater) p(atriciae) / P(ublio) Sulpicio Scribonio Rufo leg(ato)
Aug(usti) pro pr(aetore) / leg(io) XV Primig(enia).

With thanks to Prof. Dr. Mariette Horster (University of
Mainz) for the slide

A Puzzle from 1796

To the Penetrating Genius's of Oxford,
Cambridge, Eaton, Westminster, and the
Learned Society of Antiquarians. This
Curious Inscription is humbly Dedicated:

BENE.
T. H. TH. ISST.
onere. pos. et.
H. Claud. cos. TER. TRIP
E. SELLERO

5

F. IMP.
I.N. GT. onas. DO
TH. HI.
S.C.
ON. SOR

10

T. I. A. N. E.



THE PUZZLE
*To the Penetrating Genius's of Oxford, Cambridge, Eaton,
Westminster, and the Learned Society of Antiquarians.
This Curious Inscription is humbly Dedicated.*
Printed for J. Bowles at N^o 43 in Cornhill, & Carington Bowles, N^o 69 in St Pauls Church Yard, London.

With thanks to Prof. John Bodell (Brown
University, NY) for the slides

A Puzzle from 1796

To the Penetrating Genius's of Oxford,
Cambridge, Eaton, Westminster, and the
Learned Society of Antiquarians. This
Curious Inscription is humbly Dedicated:

BENE.
T. H. TH. ISST.
onere. pos. et.
H. Claud. cos. TER. TRIP
E. SELLERO

5

F. IMP.
I.N. GT. onas. DO
TH. HI.
S.C.
ON. SOR

10

T. I. A. N. E.

("Beneath this stone reposeth Claud.
Coster, tripe seller of Impington, as doth
his consort Jane").



THE PUZZLE
*To the Penetrating Genius's of Oxford, Cambridge, Eaton,
Westminster, and the Learned Society of Antiquarians.
This Curious Inscription is humbly Dedicated.*
Printed for J. Bowles at N° 43 in Cornhill, & Carington Bowles, N° 69 in St Pauls Church Yard, London.

Summary of previous research



Abbreviations are considered to be a minor phenomenon in lexicology and general linguistics.



There is a belief that their use has increased in recent decades.



Abbreviations are studied in CMC, classical philology and also medieval studies, but interaction between these disciplines is limited.

Research questions:

I How frequent is abbreviation in each historical period?

II What forms of abbreviation are used in each period, and how common are they?

III What kind of lexemes get abbreviated in different periods?

An omnibus in London, 1895

Definition of abbreviation:

‘All strategies that result in lexical forms that are made up by fewer characters than the full form of a word or a combination of words’ (Bieswanger 2013: 474).

Implications:

The full form is in use.

Bus < *omnibus* = no longer an abbreviation

The abbreviated form is shorter than the full form.

We include spellings that reflect speech (*‘tis*, *can’t*).



Methodology

- A quantitative analysis of abbreviation frequency in four periods in the History of English:
 - Twenty-first century, WhatsApp messages in Scotland and England, 2017-2018
 - Late Modern English, ca. 1700-1945
 - Early Modern English, ca. 1500-1700
 - Middle English, ca. 1066-1500
- Collecting a dataset of abbreviated spellings in each sub-corpus and annotating them:
 - For ABBREVIATION FORM (e.g. brevigraph, contraction, clipping, superscript),
 - and LEXEME CATEGORY (e.g. name, title, function word, expression of time).
- Exploratory quantitative analyses, including descriptive statistics (specifically log likelihood tests)

The corpus data

Language time period	Subcorpus	Text type	Word count	Total word count for time period	Total word count of whole corpus
ME (1066–1500)	<i>Middle English Local Documents Corpus</i> (MELD)	15th-century letters	3,323	16,486	
	<i>Middle English Local Documents Corpus</i> (MELD)	15th-century statements, receipts	1,705		
	<i>Middle English Local Documents Corpus</i> (MELD)	15th-century memoranda	11,458		
EModE (1500–1700)	<i>The Corpus of Early English Correspondence</i> (CEEC)	17th-century letters	21,580	25,871	
	<i>English Witness Depositions 1560–1760: An Electronic Text Edition</i> (ETED)	17th-century depositions	4,291		
LModE (1700–1945)	<i>The Corpus of Early English Correspondence</i> (CEEC)	Late 19th-century letters	14,456	25,883	
	<i>Corpus of Late Modern English Prose</i> , Project Gutenberg,	Early 20th-century letters	11,427		
	Imperial War Museums Website				
21st-century English (2000–present day)	<i>Transhistorical Corpus of Written English</i> (TCWE)	21st-century instant messages	21,228	21,228	
					89,468 words

Examples from the corpora

(1) WhatsApp message (18/02/2018, 11:59)

Sorry **I've** not been in touch, **I've** been doing teaching
etc in a day so far so quite pushed for time when in
Bris! I'll be around on **Weds** too later.

(2) A letter by Ernest Dowson (1889)

Thanks for yours. Also for **Chap** [...] Your letter
depressed me - but I will try **&** live till next week.
Satdy I go to a matinée of Minnie **T**.

Examples

(3) A letter by Daniel Fleming (1660)

Our adversary Studholme was apprehended yesterday
by **S^r** William Carleton at y^e house of one Sturdy a
Quaker there is a dangerous accusation put in against
him, as to y^e life of his **Ma^{ty}** where I found **Dr**

Carleton his **Ma^{ties}** chaplaine, **&c**

(4) A receipt (1462)

þ^e Fryday next be for þ^e fest of Seynt **Cle^mt** þ^e **yer-** of
kyn⁹ Edward þ^e 111j þ^e 1j · **y^s** resseyvyd by þ^e **hand^f** of
Steph.

The annotation framework:

Abbreviation	Expanded form	Form	Lexeme category	Language
Tho.	Thomas	B. Clipping	Name	Eng
tho	though	B. Clipping	Function word	Eng
P.S.	post scriptum	A. Acronym	Discursive and metadiscursive item	Lat
WTF	What the fuck	A. Acronym	Exclamation	Eng

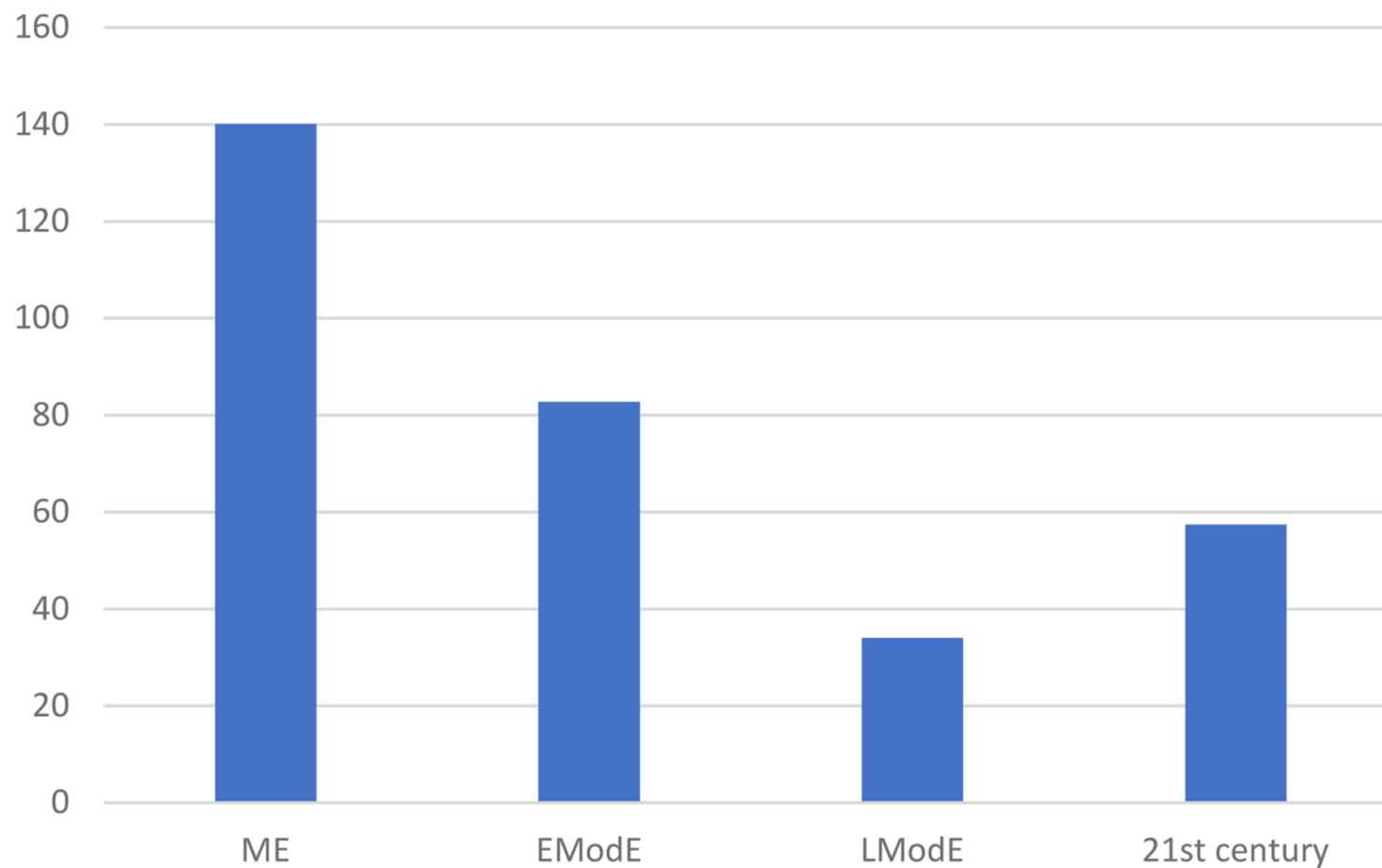
Form: categories	Examples
A acronyms/initialisms = words abbreviated to a single letter	Lol, omg, pm, p.s., v ('very')
B clippings = words abbreviated by leaving the ending out	Dec, Thurs, tho, darl, st
C contractions = words abbreviated by leaving out letters in the middle	mdear, bday, tmrw, e-mail
D informal spellings/elisions = using a non-standard spelling that is shorter than the standard form – sometimes (but not necessarily) indicating unstressed syllables and assimilation in spoken language	wanna, gonna, 'n (meet'n eat), hows (for 'how is'), defo
E letter/number homophones	b4, cu (Not a single token found!)
F logograms or symbols that replace an entire word	@ & x £
G brevigraphs/symbols that replace a syllable or a few letters	Xmas, bestʃ ('beasts'), sou ^ə ain, Nouem ^b ɪ
H superscript letters	w ^t , m ^{tie} ,

Lexeme category	Examples
Date/time	Dec, xmas, Sat
Names (personal and place names)	Jo, Tho. ‘Thomas’, Byden ^h m
Titles	Mr, Rev., G.P.
Address/affection/honorific terms	Mdear, darl, sou ⁹ ain, m ^{tie}
Discursive and metadiscursive items	i.e., etc., P.S., re:, e.g., OK
Function words	tho, btwn, &, w ^t
Measurements	li ‘libra/pound’, £ ‘British pound’, 2 ^d ‘two pence’, %
Other lexical words	vestment ^f ‘vestiments’, p ^{tie} ‘party’, imp ⁱ sonment ‘imprisonment’, inclos’d ‘enclosed’, Govt. ‘government’, email, vocab ‘vocabulary’, tix ‘tickets’
Ordinal numerals	vij th ‘seventh’, 26 th , 3 rd
Exclamations	wtf, omg, lol
Brand and organisational names	M&S ‘Marks & Spencer’

The Results



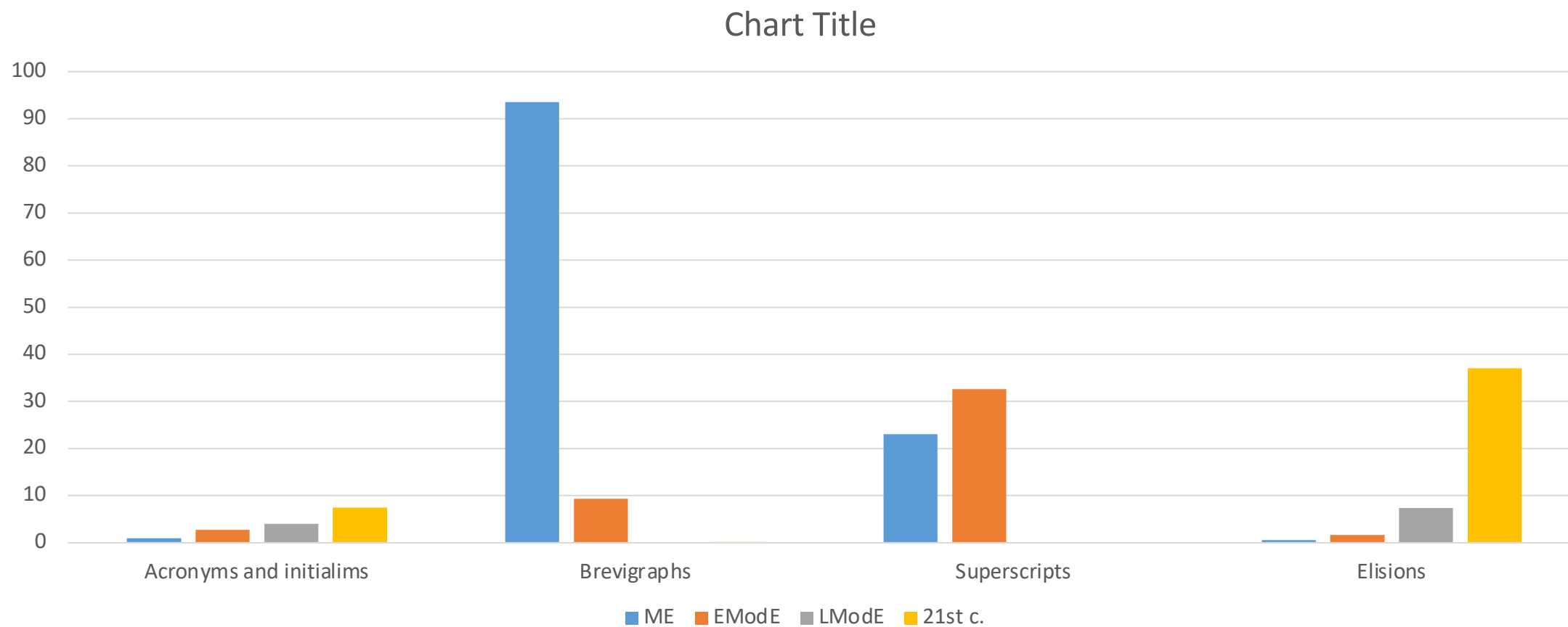
Overall frequency



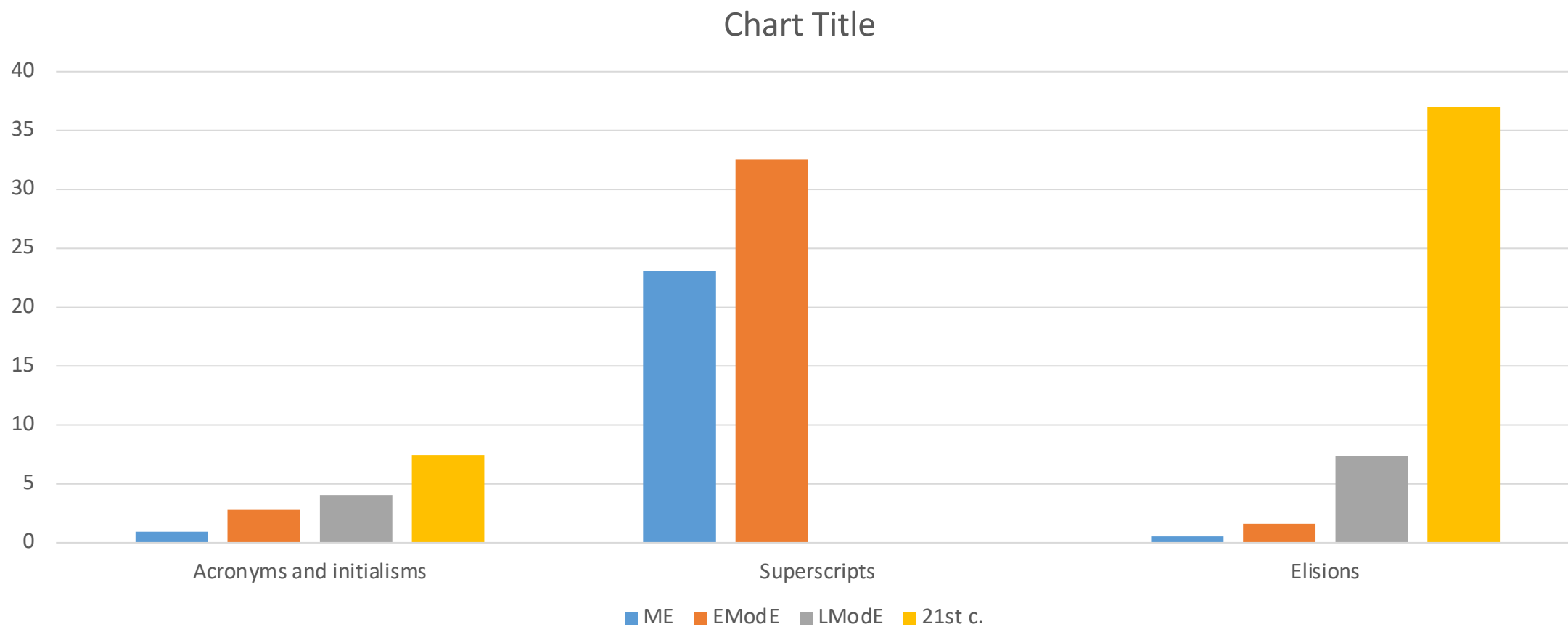
Abbreviation forms



Abbreviation forms (highlights)



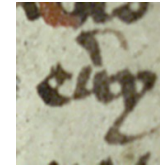
Abbreviation forms (without brevigraphs)



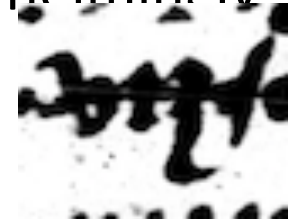
Some results:

- Abbreviation forms change considerably:

- Brevigraphs (handwritten manuscript abbreviations) are overwhelmingly popular in the ME data and still in use in EModE



every



videlicet

- Superscripts become the most popular type in EModE
 - Acronyms and Initialisms become increasingly frequent towards LModE and 21st c. English
 - The biggest increase in the 21st century happens with elisions and informal spellings

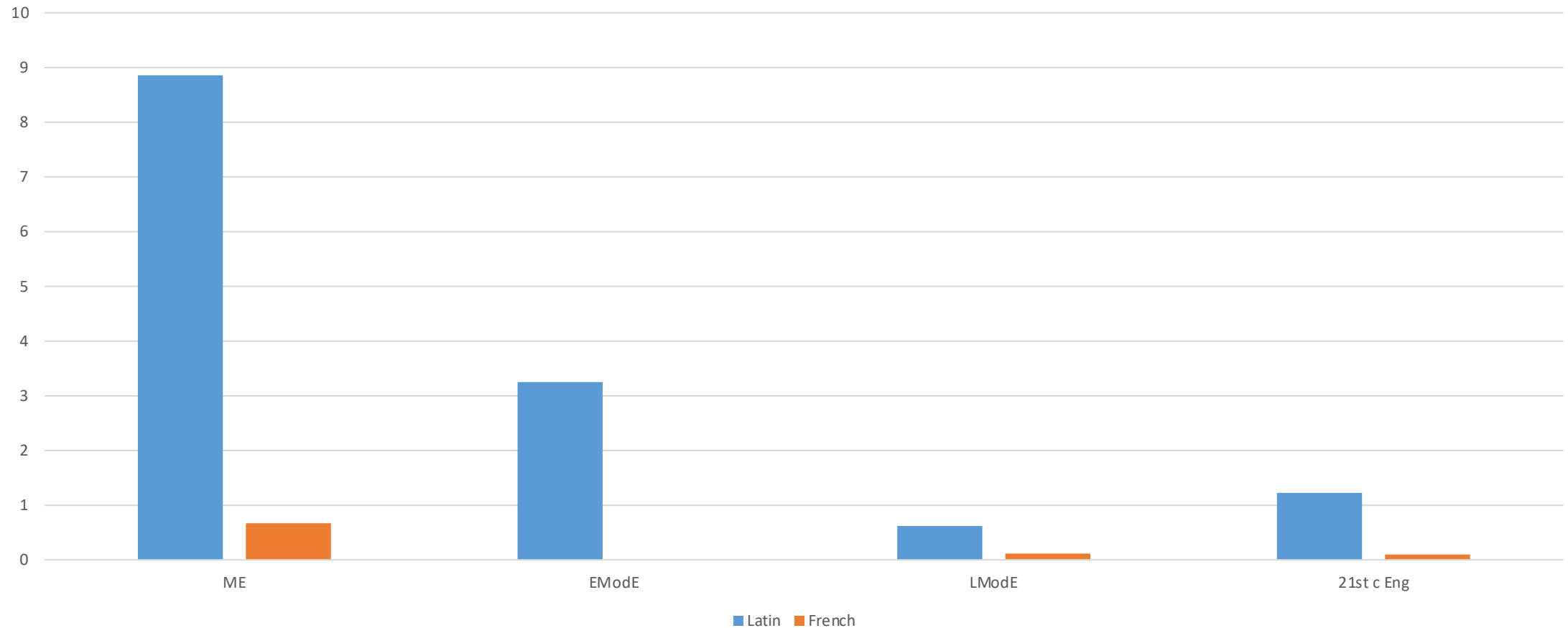
SMS

- (1) WhatsApp message (18/02/2018, 11:59) Sorry **I've** not been in touch, **I've** been doing teaching **etc** in a day so far so quite pushed for time when in **Bris!** **I'll** be around on **Weds** too later.
- Out of 786 elisions only 34 were informal spellings:
 - (21) *wanna* (3), *fabbo* (1), *tix* 'tickets', (1), *deffo* (5), *probs* (1), *ya* (3), *cos* (3), *dunno* (1), *gonna* (3), *okay* (4), *sayin* (1), *camp n furnace* (3), *nite* (1), *okies* (1), *soz* 'sorry' (1), *ta* 'thanks' (1), *u* (1)

Multilingualism



Latin and French abbreviations per corpora, normalised by 1000



What this includes: Latin

- **ME:** &c 'etc', it(em) '[also]', M^d 'me(morandum)', ꝑꝑ^a 'propia', ꝑ 'per [through]', Rob^t 'Robertus', k 'kalendas', h 'Henricus, Henrici'
- **EModE:** &c 'etc', vizt~ 'videlicet', Anno dni~ 'Anno domini', Oxon~ 'Oxoniae [Oxford, of Oxford]'
- **LModE:** i.e.; c.; PS; &c, etc (both spellings found)
- **PDE:** a.m., p.m., etc., p.s.

Discourse and metadiscourse

ME	EModE	LModE	21st century
&c-	&c~	etc.	etc
ⲡ ‘Nota’	—	—	—
M ^d ‘memorandum’	—	—	—
Jt ⁹ ‘Item’	—	—	—
—	Viz (Videlicet)	—	—
—	g ^o ‘ergo’	—	—
—	—	PS	P.S.
—	—	—	TBC
—	—	—	re
—	—	—	BTW
—	—	—	Ok, okay, k, okies

Date and time

Period	ME	EModE	LModE	21st century
Year	y ⁹ e, yer ² , 3er ² , a ^o , a ^o dm, r ² 'regni Ricardi'	Anno dnī, A.D., Anno Dom, Anno do:	Yrs	yrs
Month	Feb, Febr ^u , Aprell, Aprill, sept ⁹ , octob, Octobr ² , Nouembr ² , Nouembr, k 'kalendas', Menf ² 'Mensis'	Jan.: Jan., Feb., Febry ^e , Mar., Aug., Oct., Novem., Nov.	Jan., Aug., Sepr, Sept., Oct, Nov, Dec	Jan, Feb, sept, oct, dec
Day of the week	Saŕday	—	Thurs, Satdy, Mony	mon, tues, Wed, Thu, Thurs
Holidays	Est ⁹ woke, Est ⁹ , Anūcācoñ 'annunciation'	Xmas, Xtmas, Midsumēr	—	NY, NYE, nye, bday, xmas, Xmas
Time of day	—	—	p.m., a.m., hrs, o'clock, eve	pm, am, min, mins, morn, tmrw, o'clock

What this includes: French

- **ME:** Restus⁶, to^{les}
- **EModE:** -
- **LModE:** C'est (1), l'oeuvre (1)... both in correspondence of Ernest Dowson
- **PDE:** CDG (2) 'Charles de Gaulle' [Airport code]

Results

- Latin is commonly in all periods in a discursive/metadiscursive function
- Some expressions of time are also in Latin
 - The number of Latin abbreviations is higher in the Middle English period and decreases over time
- Discourse organising abbreviations can also become fossilised and formulaic, staying in use for centuries:
 - *etc.*, *P.S.* (also *a.m.* and *p.m.*)
 - A later example is *ok* (in our data: *ok*, *k*, *okies*, *okay*)
- French usage in the present corpora was very sporadic
 - RSVP 'recipe s'il vous placet' was not found in the present data

Bibliography

- Bieswanger, Markus. 2007. “2 abbrevia8 or not 2 abbrevi8: A contrastive analysis of different space- and time-saving strategies in English and German text messages”
<<http://didattica.uniroma2.it/assets/uploads/corsi/39543/smsgermanenglish.pdf>>
- Bieswanger, Markus. 2013. “Micro-linguistic structural features of computer-mediated communication”. In Herring, Susan C., Dieter Stein & Tuija Virtanen (eds.). *Pragmatics of Computer-mediated Communication*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 463-485.
- Grice, Paul. 1975. “Logic and Conversation” In: Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.). *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, 41-58. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Nurmi, Timo. 2004. *Kirjoittajan ABC*:
http://webcgi.oulu.fi/oykk/abc/kielenhuolto/oikeinkirjoitus/lyhenteet/lyhentamisen_periaatteita/
- Petti, Anthony G. 1977. *English literary hands from Chaucer to Dryden*. London: Arnold.

Bonus slides

Acronyms and initialisms can be productive

29/03/2017, 15:01 - Conversation partner V: Hey everyone, how are you all? Was wondering if anyone fancies joining me at **Camp & Furnace** on Friday for 'Guilty Pleasures' - a night of unadulterated 80s & 90s music... I bought 2 tickets but potential date can't make it ... so ... there's a ticket waiting for someone... it's 10pm until 3am ...



Visit Liverpool
Camp and Furnace

01/04/2017, 11:16 - Conversation partner V: Glad it went well. My night was a disaster... was Boston Pool with work mates and 1 of them volunteered to join me at **C&F**... got there 11**pm**. Found out Guilty Pleasures is NEXT Friday! How did I read about it on **FB**, buy 2 tickets and not notice? Can you imagine if I'd taken a date Jeez!

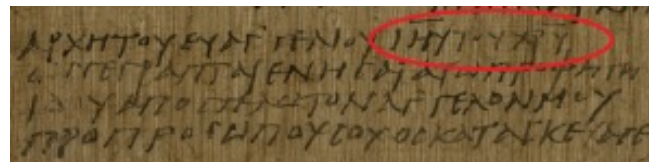
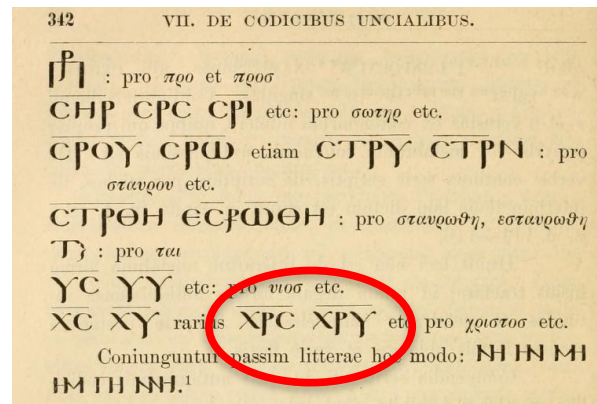
04/04/2017, 16:01 - Conversation partner V: So ... after last Friday's fiasco (I got the date wrong) who fancies joining me for a night of dancing to 80s/90s/00s pop music at **Camp & Furnace** this Friday, 10pm?

MEERBY

20145

Continuity III: Nomina Sacra

The scribal practice of abbreviating 'sacred names' using Greek letters



A Christian amulet, late 3rd/early 4th century
(P.Oxy. 76.5073)



The Book of Kells,

Trinity College Library, Dublin,
MS A. I.

c. 800

On **X̄pes mæsse** uhtan (c. 1100, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ann. 1021)

From **X'temmas** next following. (1551. OED, E. Lodge)