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PIECING TOGETHER LATE MODERN ENGLISH SPELLING: SOCIOLINGUISTIC INSIGHTS INTO VARIATION

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There are in Present-day English two orthographic realisations for nouns like *colour*, *theatre* and *licence*. The ones hereby adopted are characteristic of British English, whereas *color*, *theater* and *license* exemplify American English. This multivocality exists in spite of the overall standardisation of the orthographic system, which these words – along with others like *realise/realize*, *judgement/judgment* or *amoeba/ameba* – seem to have eluded. Their distribution can be understood from a functional perspective, as it relies on geographic or diatopic differentiation between the aforementioned varieties of English. Their very co-occurrence, however, raises the many questions which motivate my research: When did these spelling variants originate? How did they develop throughout history and why have they been preserved over time? How did these forms become standard in British and in American English? What intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors intervene in the distribution of the spelling variants? Can these instances of spelling variation – however trivial they may seem – be considered a reflection of broader sociolinguistic phenomena? If so, what does this mean for our understanding of orthography and spelling? These are some of the questions that I intend to answer in this talk. For that purpose, I present a corpus-based investigation that looks into the process of standardisation of the three instances of variation mentioned at the beginning, paying particular attention to their development in the Late Modern period both across British and American Englishes.