Revisiting Pleonastic that in Early English Scientific Writing

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Abstract
The origin of pleonastic that can be traced back to Old English, where it could appear in syntactic constructions consisting of a preposition + demonstrative pronoun (i.e. for þy þat, for þem þe) or a subordinator (i.e. of þat). The diffusion of this pleonastic form is an early Middle English development as a result of its standardization as the general subordinator in the period, which motivated its use as a pleonastic word in combination with many kinds of conjunctions (i.e. now that, gif that, when that, etc.) and prepositions (i.e. before that, save that, in that) (Fischer 1992: 295). The phenomenon increased considerably in Late Middle English, declining rapidly in the 17th century to such an extent that it was virtually obliterated towards the end of that same century (Rissanen 1999: 303-304). The list of subordinating elements includes relativizers (i.e. this that), adverbial relatives (i.e. there that) and a number of subordinators (i.e. after, as, because, before, beside, for, if, since, sith, though, until, when, while, etc.).

The present paper reconsiders the status of pleonastic that in the history of English pursuing the following objectives: a) to analyse the use and distribution of pleonastic that in a corpus of early English medical writing (in the period 1375–1700); b) to classify the construction in terms of genre, i.e. treatises and recipes; and c) to assess the decline of the construction with the different conjunctive words. The data used as source of evidence come from The Corpus of Early English Medical Writing, i.e. Middle English Medical Texts (MEMT for the period 1375–1500) and Early Modern English Medical Texts (EMEMT for the period 1500–1700).

1. Introduction
Derived from the Greek term πλεονασμός ‘superabundance, excess’, a pleonasm is used in Linguistics to denote a particular type of redundant linguistic expression, either as a fault of style, or as a figure purposely used for special force or clearness (OED s.v. pleonasm, n.). In many cases, these pleonasms function as a rhetorical repetition in search of a specific linguistic effect, where the redundancy can be dropped with no loss of meaning. Pleonasms can be syntactic (i.e. I know that she will be here soon, the reason is because) or strictly semantic (i.e. a free gift, a true fact, aches and pains, null and void, tuna fish, at 12 midnight, etc.).

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2 The emphatic element of pleonasms turns them into a recurrent device in many languages. Spanish, among others, count on instances such as subír para arriba, bajar para abajo, el día martes, el mes de
The phenomenon has been differently labelled in the literature, from hyperdetermination (Malkiel 1957: 79) to hypercharacterization (Lehman 2005: 119) and overcharacterization (Booij 2007: 273). To my knowledge, the most detailed analysis of the topic is provided by Lehman, who classifies pleonasm at different levels of linguistic analysis. In the light of his categorization, the phenomenon is classified into tautology (i.e. one constituent is synonymous with the other); stylistic pleonasm (i.e. pragmatically motivated) and hypercharacterization (i.e. grammatically motivated), regardless of whether it responds to semantic or morpho-syntactic motivations (2005: 119).

The use of pleonastic that in the history of English can be safely ascribed to Lehman’s category of hypercharacterization according to which the general subordinator that becomes spuriously added to all kinds of conjunctions and prepositions (Fischer 1992: 295), as in examples (1-2).

(1) and y beleue ȝif that he wyl take hede to alle […] (lanfranc_chirurgia_magna_2.txt).

(2) The man that is borne while that the Moon enters in this sign (1539_Moulton_MyrrourOrGlasseOfHelth_Astrology_NORM.txt).

The origin of the phenomenon can be traced back to the Old English prepositional conjunctions, i.e. those syntactic groups consisting of a prepositional element, an oblique form of the demonstrative pronoun þet along with the particle þe or þet, in cases like for þy þat, for þem þe, to þon þet, etc., the last element considered to be optional (Mitchell 1985: §2420; Rissanen 1997: 374). By the end of the Old English period, the second and third elements of prepositional conjunctions began to weaken until their progressive obliteration, to such an extent that the third element was generally replaced by þat, appended as a marker of subordination even to conjunctions with which it did not appear in Old English, prepositions also included, such as before that, save that, in that (Beal 1988: 60). Even though its use considerably increased throughout the late Middle English period, the construction reached its climax in the 16th century, declining progressively in the course of the the following century (Rissanen 1999: 303-304).

Different interpretations account for the development of the construction in Middle English, one considering it as a native and the other as a non-native phenomenon. The rise of septiembre, hoy en día, hoy por hoy, etc. In French, the most typical example of pleonasm is the use of the word pas with the negative adverb ne for strictly emphatic purposes, as in je ne suis pas riche ‘I am not rich’ (Wigdorsky 2004: 171-178; also Iglesias-Casal 1989: 118-122).

3 The term overcharacterization is elsewhere considered to be more lexically-oriented to refer to the addition of a superfluous suffix in the coining of a new word, the terms hyperdetermination and hypercharacterization have a morpho-syntactic bias (Gardani 2015: 538).
pleonastic *that*, on the one hand, is viewed as the result of its standardization as the general subordinator in Middle English, the list including nominal, adjectival and particular types of adverbial clauses. Rissanen argues that “the need for this kind of marker was created by the collapse of the Old English subordinating groups [...] and the increase in the number and variety of subordination” (1997: 375). The heterogeneous nature of the subordinator *that* plausibly contributed to its extension to other types of subordinate clauses where it was not strictly necessary, becoming a frequent form in the latter part of Middle English (Kivimaa 1966: 248; Fischer 1992: 295).  

Its origin, on the other hand, has also been conceived from the point of view of a language contact situation as a result of a likely Scandinavian influence in the light of the number of instances found in East Midland texts (Rissanen 1997: 379; 1999: 303; also Kivimaa 1966: 255-256). Old Norse *at* could be used pleonastically in the same way as the earlier English *that* in a construction like *ef at* ‘if that’ and, moreover, similar constructions are still used in some Scandinavian languages. Even though the Old Norse impulse may have played an important role in the incipient stages of the development, it cannot be overestimated in the light of the diffusion of the phenomenon in other early South West Midland texts (Rissanen 1997: 379).

Regardless of the native or non-native origin of the construction, it is also a fact that the particular requirements of metre could have also paved the way to its standardization. Pleonastic *that* is many a time used as a line filler to provide metrical regularity, which explains why it is observed to be a device twice as common in Chaucer’s verse than in his prose (Kivimaa 1968: 48-49; 70-71). Notwithstanding this, pleonastic and non-pleonastic *that* are not, however, clearly distinguished in Chaucer, eventually producing the unconscious incorporation of this spurious element in his prose (Brinton 1996: 352; also Potter, Jefferson and Stokes 2007: 135).

In our opinion, however, there is still an important gap in the field, especially from a historical viewpoint since the phenomenon has been mostly discussed synchronically in Late Middle English, Chaucer’s verse in particular. The present paper then reconsiders the origin, development and decline of pleonastic *that* from a diachronic perspective in the light of *The Corpus of Early English Medical Writing* in the historical period 1375-1700.

Medical writing is free from the artificiality of verse compositions and may be a reliable

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4 Even though more difficult to justify, the collapse of verb-final word order, another subordination marker in Old English, could have also indirectly contributed to the proliferation of pleonastic *that* after the Norman conquest (Rissanen 1997: 375).

5 This use is mentioned in *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* giving an example of the phrase *ef at* introducing a subordinate clause. This pleonastic use of *at* is also included in the glossary of Gordon’s *Introduction to Old Norse* (1957), providing references to text passages.
source of evidence on many morpho-syntactic changes in the history of English. By the year 1475, the first phase of the vernacularization of scientific and medical writing was largely complete, to such an extent that the use of the vernacular became even more common than Latin for the rendering of scientific material (Voigts 1996: 816; Pahta and Taavitsainen 2004: 12; Taavitsainen and Pahta 1998: 159). Shaped under the shelter of the Greco–Roman models, Latin together with French served as the main sources for vernacular translations of scientific material in Late Middle and early Modern English (Siraisi 1990: 53; 2010: 256). Remedy books, on the contrary, were still oriented towards a more popular audience, thus continuing the Old English tradition being less influenced by classical patterns of writing. The second and third phases of vernacularization span from 1475 to 1550 and from 1550 to 1700, respectively, and it was precisely in this last stage when the supremacy of Latin ceased in favour of English, partially influenced by the publication of the *Philosophical Transactions* in the vernacular.

In the absence of a national standard for scientific communication, the process of vernacularization of science may cast some light on the origin and development of different linguistic changes in the history of English. In the light of this assumption, the present paper has been conceived with the following objectives: a) to analyse the distribution of pleonastic *that* in a corpus of early English medical writing (1375–1700); b) to classify the construction in terms of the different types of medical texts; and c) to assess the decline of the construction throughout the early modern English period.

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6 Taavitsainen proposes 1475 as the beginning of the second phase of vernacularization coinciding with the introduction of the printing press in England (2012: 98).