Contracted forms in newspaper language: Inter- and intra-textual variation*

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1. Introduction

During the last few decades, contracted forms have been studied by scholars with different aims. Some have focussed on grammatical and register-related factors, conditioning the use of contractions in corpora of spoken and written British English (Black 1977, Forsheden 1983, Hiller 1984, Kjellmer 1995); others, within the framework of generative syntax, have concentrated on 'knock-out' factors, blocking contraction of auxiliaries (Zwicky 1970, King 1970, Kaisse 1983 and 1985). It is generally accepted that contracted forms are primarily a feature of spoken, informal English. The role of contracted *not* in spoken American English characterized by discourse situations and speaker interaction of different kinds has been investigated by Yaeger-Dror (1996, and references therein).

This study, which is part of my current work on contractions in written English for a Ph D thesis, is most closely related to the first tradition, even if its scope is more limited and its aim somewhat different: to find possible text-related factors explaining how contracted forms are used in texts of a relatively formal written register. The focus of interest is on the place and function of contractions in the LOB Corpus press text categories A–C, each representing its own genre (reportage, editorials, reviews) with varying levels of formality.

The contracted forms dealt with in this paper are the reduced forms of the verbs BE, HAVE, and *will*, *would*, encliticized to a preceding element, most often a subject pronoun (AUX-contractions), and also NOT, reduced to *n't* and joined to all types of auxiliary verbs (NOT-contractions), *e.g. I'm* instead of *I am*, *you've* for *you have*, *couldn't* for *could not* (see also Figure 1).

My material consists of the LOB press texts containing one or more contractions; my method is a close textual analysis of each occurrence. Two basic distinctions are made, between AUX- and NOT-contractions,

and between contractions that are parts of direct quotations and those that are not. The following lines of investigation are pursued: firstly, the extent to which AUX- and NOT-contractions occur within or outside quotation marks; secondly, positions in discourse favouring contractions that do not appear in direct quotations; thirdly, possible discourse functions performed by contractions.

2. Quantitative data

2.1 Distribution of contracted forms

The three press text categories in LOB are not of the same size. Therefore, in Table 1, the overall distribution of the 318 contractions is related to the number of texts in each category. The results indicate that contracted forms have about equal relative frequencies in reportage and reviews, and occur less frequently in editorials.

Table 1. Contracted forms in the entire LOB text categories A, B, C.

Text category	Texts of 2,000 words n	Contractions n	Contractions per text
A Reportage	44	189	4.3
B Editorial	27	54	2.0
C Reviews	17	75	4.4
A–C	88	318	3.6

A closer analysis of the occurrences indicates that quite a large number of texts do not contain any contracted forms at all; see Table 2:

Table 2. Texts with and without contracted forms.

Text category	+ contr		- contr		Total
	n	%	n	%	n
A Reportage	27	61	17	39	44
B Editorial	10	37	17	63	27
C Reviews	9	53	8	47	17
A–C	46	52	42	48	88

The largest proportion of texts containing contracted forms appears in category A (27 out of 44 texts). In the B category, texts containing contractions are least common (10 out of 27 texts).

Since my aim is to study the paradigmatic distribution of contractions, I will include in this survey only the texts that contain at least one contraction. Therefore, in the following, all relative frequency figures will be calculated in relation to these texts (and not in relation to the total number of texts in the three categories; see Table 3).

In the individual texts the distribution is very uneven, ranging from zero to 27 contractions. The most common pattern for a text is to have no or just one contraction (Tables 4 a–c).

Table 3. Relative frequency of contracted forms.

Text category	Texts of 2,000 words n	Contractions n	Contractions per text
A Reportage	27	189	7.0
B Editorial	10	54	5.4
C Reviews	9	75	8.3
A–C	46	318	6.9

Table 4 a. Distribution of contracted forms in category A (27 texts).

Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n
A01	2	A10	12	A18	1	A25	1	A35	13	A42	1
A02	1	A12	6	A19	12	A26	22	A37	4	A43	3
A06	4	A14	1	A21	2	A27	1	A39	23		
A07	18	A16	3	A22	4	A33	5	A40	3		
A09	11	A17	5	A24	22	A34	1	A41	8		

Summary: Range 23–1; as many as seven texts contain only one contraction.

Table 4 b. Distribution of contracted forms in category B (10 texts).

Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n
B05	13	B08	8	B14	14	B22	5	B26	1
B06	1	B09	1	B16	1	B23	6	B27	4

Summary: Range 14–1; four texts contain one contraction.

Table 4 c. Distribution of contracted forms in category C (9 texts).

Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n	Text	n
C02	1	C06	27	C08	1	C13	2	C17	8
C04	19	C07	11	C10	2	C16	4		

Summary: Range 27–1.

2.2 AUX-contractions and NOT-contractions

Each of the two main types of contractions (AUX and NOT) comprises several different forms: eight AUX-forms and 25 possible NOT-forms (only 16 of the most common ones are represented in this sample), the distribution of which is shown in Figure 1. Since individual forms are not of main interest here, only the total numbers in the collapsed three text categories are shown. As Figure 1 reveals, each group is represented by a very similar number of instances (156 AUX- and 162 NOT-contractions).

A closer look at how AUX- and NOT-contractions are distributed in each text category (Table 5) reveals that there is a slight overrepresentation for AUX-contractions in A (54%) and for NOT-contractions in B (61%) and C (56%).

A comparison across categories indicates that AUX-contractions occur to a similar extent in A and C, with fewer in B; the NOT-contractions, on the other hand, present about the same relative figure in A and B, and a higher one in C. A graphic representation of these distributions is shown in Figure 2.
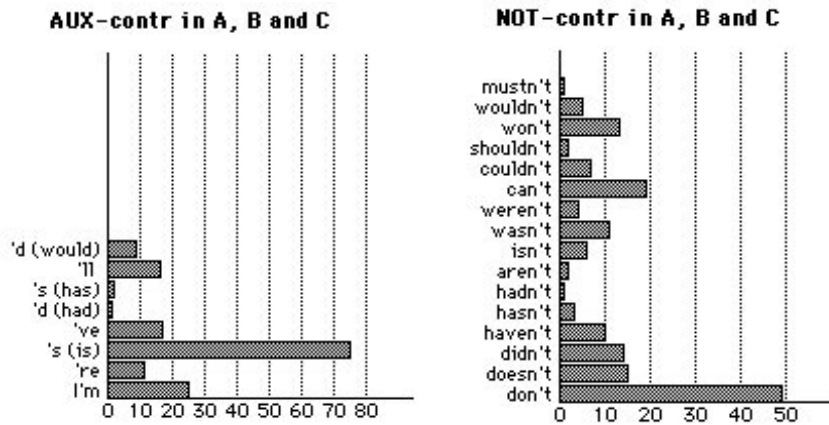
Figure 1. AUX- and NOT-contractions in LOB press categories (raw figures). Total n of AUX-contractions: 156; total n of NOT-contractions: 162.
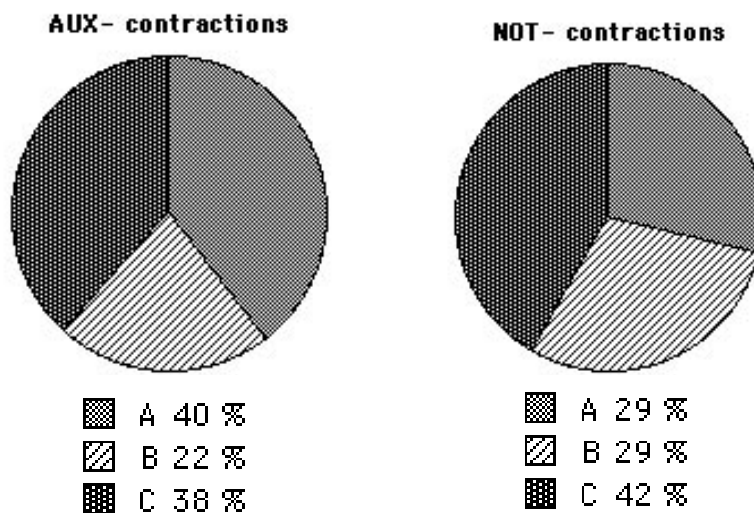

Figure 2. Distribution of AUX and of NOT-contractions in the different text categories. (For raw data, see Table 5, for number of texts with contractions, see Table 2.)

Table 5. Distribution of AUX-contractions and NOT-contractions. (Relative frequency per text within brackets.)

Text category	AUX-contr			NOT-contr			Total
	n	(rel f)	%	n	(rel f)	%	n
A Reportage	102	(3.8)	54	87	(3.2)	46	189
B Editorial	21	(2.1)	39	33	(3.3)	61	54
C Reviews	33	(3.6)	44	42	(4.7)	56	75
A–C	156		49	162		51	318

2.3 Quoted and 'original' contractions

Quite a large proportion of contracted forms are found in direct quotations, where contractions are used to render direct speech or, in a few cases, titles of literary works, songs etc. (for further discussion, see 3.1). Quotations are 'second-hand' renderings of what somebody else has (allegedly) said or written. The term adopted for these contractions is 'Q-forms'. The remaining forms, which are the writer's own choice, originate in the corpus text, and have been labelled 'original' contractions, or 'O-forms'. Table 6 reveals that the distribution of Q- and O-forms is very different in the three text categories. It is clear that most contractions in A occur in quotations (77%), whereas, in B and C, the majority are the writer's own choice (76% and 61%). These differences are highly significant: <0.001 (chi-square 66.2, d.f. 2).

Table 6. Distribution of quoted and original contracted forms. (Relative frequency per text within brackets.)

Text category	Q-forms			O-forms			Total
	n	rel fr	%	n	rel fr	%	n
A Reportage	146	(5.4)	77	43	(1.6)	23	189
B Editorial	13	(1.3)	24	41	(4.1)	76	54
C Reviews	29	(3.2)	39	46	(5.1)	61	75
A–C	188		59	130		41	318

The different distributions in A, B, and C are depicted graphically in Figure 3:
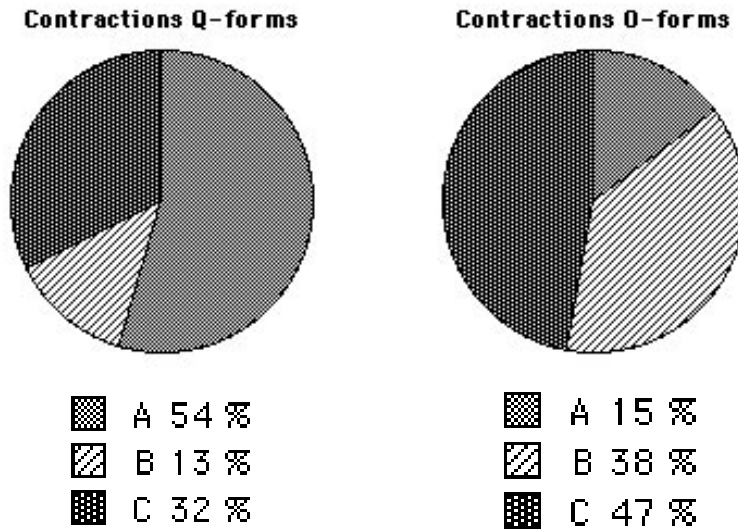

Figure 3. Distribution of quoted and original contracted forms in the different text categories. (For raw data, see Table 6, for number of texts with contractions, see Table 2.)

2.4 Relationship AUX-/ NOT-contractions and quoted/original forms
So far, I have given an account of the separate distributions of AUX- and NOT-contractions (not very different across the three text categories) and of Q- and O-forms (significantly different). When these two aspects are combined so that Q- and O-forms are divided into AUX- and NOT-forms, these distributional differences (Table 7) prove to be highly significant as well, with an error probability of <0.001 (chi-square 71.8, d.f. 2).

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Table 7. Distribution of quoted and original AUX- and NOT-contractions. (Relative frequency per text within brackets.)

Text category	Q-forms				O-forms				Total
	AUX	%	NOT	%	AUX	%	NOT	%	
A Reportage	80	42	66	35	22	12	21	11	189
	(3.0)		(2.4)		(0.8)		(0.8)		
B Editorial	8	15	5	9	13	24	28	52	54
	(0.8)		(0.5)		(1.3)		(2.8)		
C Reviews	20	27	9	12	13	17	33	44	75
	(2.2)		(1.0)		(1.4)		(3.7)		
A–C	108		80		48		82		318

Figure 4, a visual presentation of the data in Table 7, illustrates the relative size of the four combinations of aspects of contractions in each text category (Q-AUX, Q-NOT, O-AUX, O-NOT). The bars illustrate both the relative distributions (in frequency per 20,000 words) in each category and the relative differences between the categories.
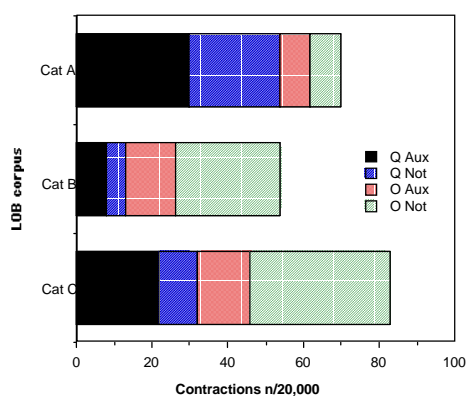

Figure 4. Profile of contractions per 20,000 words in LOB text categories A, B and C (cf. Table 7).

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3. *Illustration and evaluation of variant distribution*

3.1 *Contracted forms in quotations (Q-forms)*

In this study, all instances referred to as *quotations* occur in parts of the text which are surrounded by quotation marks—double or single. As stated in McArthur (1992: 838–39), quotation marks are used for several purposes. One purpose is to 'indicate direct speech (that is the words of a speaker quoted, more or less exactly).' In newspaper language, quotations are used conventionally to give an illusion of authentic spoken language with the functions, among others, to add verisimilitude to the writer's report of what has been said (Crystal and Davy 1969: 179) and to free the writer of the responsibility for inappropriate views or wordings (Bell, 1991: 207–209). In this type of quotation, contracted forms appear quite frequently, but are not consistently used; for some examples see (1) – (3) below. In real spoken language, contractions would be employed much more frequently (Forsheden, 1983: 24–26). In this short paper, it is not possible to discuss what factors might lie behind the writer's decision (conscious or not) to use a contracted or a non-contracted form in quotations; I will regard the quotation marks as sufficient to explain the use of contracted forms in these positions. In all the examples, I will use italics to draw attention to the contracted forms:

(1) "I am now compelled to say that I *don't* accept his good faith." (A02:82)

(2) "But if *there's* anything I can do for you, anywhere you want to go, or you feel that somebody is trying to put it across you, just you let me know and *I'll* be right here. *Nobody's* going to shove Ole Uncle Sam around!" (B05:16–17)

(3) "But *I'll* say this. *I'd* like to live in America and do some writing there. *It's* a very free place to write in, and *there's* the advantage that no one knows what *you're* writing about anyway." (C06:27–28)

In (1) *don't* occurs in a statement of relatively formal tone, where *I am* is not contracted. Both (2) and (3) represent informal colloquial language. In (2) it is notable that *is* after *somebody* is not contracted, whereas *is* after *nobody* in the following sentence is. In (3), all the finite auxiliary forms are contracted.

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Apart from indicating direct speech, quotation marks are used to 'indicate quoted material (words taken from another source in writing or print)' (McArthur 1992: 838–39), for example, song texts. A third use is to indicate titles of books, films, songs etc., see (4) – (5). Contracted forms in these last two categories leave the writer no choice:

(4) American pianist Floyd Cramer, who played for Elvis on "*It's* Now or Never," looks like having a success with "On the Rebound." (C04:99)

(5) Richard Todd will be seen in a sophisticated comedy and a war drama— "*Don't* Bother to Knock" and "The Long and the Short and the Tall." (C17:12)

3.2 Original contracted forms outside quotations (O-forms)

As hinted at in 3.1, the use of colloquial, spoken-language features in newspaper language has been studied previously. In Lagergren (1994:1), it is claimed that 'newspapers adopt a conversational style, or let the oral mode into the written language to establish contact with the reader'. Lagergren's main source is Fowler (1991: 61 ff), who suggests a list of different features, including contracted forms, that create an 'illusion of orality' and at the same time of 'informality, familiarity and friend-liness', that is, they are used to achieve an effect. The present study will show that this effect of 'informality, familiarity,' etc. is often particularly noticeable at certain points in a text. This means that contracted forms are not used randomly but are more or less consciously chosen by the writer. They can be used recurrently in compliance with the conventions of a particular register; they can also be used sporadically to help produce an effect of register shift in the discourse. I will attempt to identify and describe some positions where contracted forms typically occur and discuss their function in these contexts.

3.2.1 Headlines

Easily identifiable parts of text where quite a few contractions are found are headlines and various kinds of headings (parts of the following examples are written in capitals—as they are in the LOB text):

(6) PROBE THE DRUG PROFITS AND *DON'T* TAKE IT OUT OF MOTHERS AND CHILDREN (A01:86)

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(7) *DON'T* SHOW YOUR LEGS: BY ORDER (A24:61)

(8) Diana has met the Queen, studies in Paris, visits USA and *SHE'S* TO BE A DEBUTANTE AT VERSAILLES (A37:1)

(9) *IT'S* YOUR MONEY (B27:106)

According to Crystal and Davy (1969: 174), headlines seek to 'kindle a spark of interest in the potential reader.' The use of contracted forms could be one way of making the message look interesting and easily accessible. In (9) we even find a direct address to the reader.

3.2.2 Introductory passages

Another position where contractions occur is in introductory passages. These should be understood to include various positions in the introductory paragraph, and also topic sentences in later paragraphs in the text. The classification of contractions in this and the following category is necessarily to some degree subjective, since borderlines between different parts of texts are not always clear, especially in short reportage and review texts. I have therefore been restrictive in assigning forms to these categories, in order not to over-interpret the data.

   In introductory paragraphs, the function of contractions seems to be to establish a common ground for cooperation between the writer and the reader, to create a feeling of mutual understanding (Nash 1980: 120). The contracted form might be perceived as an inviting gesture of friendliness from the writer to the reader. The same function is served in topic sentences, but here the contracted forms could also be seen as discourse markers facilitating the transition from one unit of thought to the next. The author shows himself, as it were, piecemeal throughout the text, guiding the reader. Examples:

(10) Well, *I'm* not of this lady's persuasion. (A17:53)

(11) I *don't know* why I was so impressed with this poem but, on reflection, it might be that I took a guilty interest in the devilment business. (B05:87)

(12) Now comes "The Right Approach" [. . .] and *it's* a glum business. (C04:10)

3.2.3 Concluding passages

Roughly the same number of contractions as in 'introductory passages' are found in concluding ones (see Table 8). To this category have been referred contractions in the last few sentences in a text—the summing-up or the 'punch lines' of the entire text. Also in the final sentences of any paragraph, 'concluding contractions' are used to sum up and, as a linking device, to show that something new is coming, a function similar to that of topic sentences. Examples:

(13) Ten reserve games, the last five at centre forward, and seven goals—*that's* Cheung's record. (A07:128)

(14) So please *don't* start unloading bundles of old bus tickets at his office! (B22:78)

(15) This splendid disc proves Joe's versatility, which is going to make him a top star this year—*you'll* see. (C17:45)

3.2.4 Possible further factors influencing original contractions

In the previous sections the focus has been on positional variation with ensuing functional values. The remaining forms are much more difficult to define and describe. In their different ways, however, most of them seem to fulfil the kind of function discussed above, i.e. to create a feeling of the author's presence in the text, making it more intimate, friendly, and informal. Since it is not possible to discern unequivocal functions, these instances have simply been called 'others.'

In the following, I give some tentative descriptions. One function is in 'fixed expressions,' where the uncontracted forms would look strange, as in:

(16) No wonder he *can't see the wood for the trees.* (B14:116)

(17) *That's why* we will not exploit this deep split, but back the Government against the rebellion in its ranks. (B26:16)

(18) Discovering herself pregnant she has an abortion, but her lover *couldn't care less* and goes off on a ski-ing trip with the girl in the next apartment. (C16:65)

Another factor could be rhetorical questions, as in:

(19) Why *shouldn't* the special beneficiaries pay a little extra out of their own pocket? (B14:41)

Sometimes indirect speech is used to mirror the actual utterance (cf. Tannen 1989: 98), as in:

(20) Now an anonymous reader writes to tell me she *couldn't* have seen Venus that night because it *wasn't* shining! (B22:83)

When the writer speaks directly to the reader, contracted forms are natural, as in:

(21) You got to get it into your head, son ... people *don't* like things as they should be—not on record, anyway. (C04:72)

In the B category, 'editorializing' is fairly common; we 'hear' the author's voice comment on the topic, as in the following cases:

(22) He *doesn't*, of course. (B14:14)

(23) *Don't* think for one moment that *it's* going to stop there. (B14:30)

There are also other examples of a very personal and intimate tone where the reader senses the person behind the text, for instance:

(24) And, unwittingly, poor girl, she committed a minor social sin. Her deep red dress, *I'm* told by the women with an eye for these things, clashed with the Queen's black and plum sequined dress. (A09:51)

(25) His image *wasn't* smooth or glossy or predictable, but, oh my goodness, he was alive. (A18:31)

As shown in Figure 1, the most common NOT-contractions are those of DO (*don't, doesn't, didn't*). These forms, together with *can't*, quite often appear in fairly formal style, as in:

(26) Some houses, it is true, might now fall in price, particularly the pre-1919 houses, since the Government's lending scheme on these has been abandoned. But the societies *don't* want to lend money on these old houses. So in that case, too, the young home-builders will be frustrated. (A16:132)

Also in reviews, these forms (NOT-contractions of DO and *can*) quite often appear in a formal register. In the following extract (from *The Observer*) they seem to be used for rhetorical effect:

(27) LAUTREC'S liking for whores and dancers and singers and acrobats as subjects was, of course, a perfectly commonplace taste among artists of his time. What is singular about his use of them is that no other artist, of his time or any other, has painted them so directly, intimately and pertinently. He *doesn't*, on the one hand, use them as symbols, pegs for a moral or aesthetic attitude […]; and on the other hand, he *doesn't* use them only for the way they look […]. This *can't* be explained away by his extreme personal involvement with them. Artists *don't* necessarily bring the deepest obsessions of their life into their art [. . .] A poet who is drunk *doesn't* necessarily write odes to Bacchus. A painter who loves whores *doesn't* have to paint whores. . . (C07:5–13)

3.2.5 Summing up the distribution of original contracted forms

The analysis, summarized in Table 8, shows that the three categories 'headlines', 'introductory' and 'concluding' passages together comprise more than half of the O-forms. In the reportage category they account for the majority of instances, in the editorial category for about one third, and in the reviews for nearly half of the occurrences. These distributional differences are highly significant, with an error probability of <0.001 (chi-square 19.3, d.f. 2).

   Most of the contractions in the category 'others' are NOT-contractions (50/62 = 81%), the two largest groups of which are DO-contractions (23/50) and *can't* + *couldn't* (10/50).

Table 8. O-forms in some text positions.

Text category	Position					Others	Total
	H	I	C	Σ	%	n	Σ
A Reportage	9	14	9	32	74%	11	43
B Editorial	2	5	7	14	34%	27	41
C Reviews	2	10	10	22	48%	24	46
A–C	13	29	26	68	52%	62	130

H: Headlines, headings, and subheadings. I: Introductory passages. C: Concluding passages.

4. Summing up the distribution and characteristics of quoted and original contractions

It has been shown that Q-forms occur most frequently in text category A, reportage, and that the majority of all Q-forms (57%) are AUX-contractions. O-forms, on the other hand, are particularly predominant in B, editorials, but also in C, reviews; they consist mainly of NOT-contractions (63%). The chi-square test shows that these differences are highly significant and thus very likely characteristic of the respective text type.

The main function of the Q-forms, mainly associated with AUX-contractions, seems to be to convey a feeling of a true-to-life rendering of what interviewees and others have said, and of how they said it. Because they are 'hedged' by quotation marks, they have their own territory and do not need to fit into the surrounding register. They can also occupy any position in the text.

Using the O-forms is a more delicate matter than inserting Q-forms. Authors of editorials and reviews seem to use them in passages where they enter into a more or less subtle mental 'dialogue' with their readers. This is often done at certain typical points in the discourse, like introductions and conclusions, or other points, where the writer wants to establish a feeling of mutual understanding and cooperation between her/himself and the reader. Usually there will also be other features in that part of the text that indicate a relaxation of the otherwise quite formal tone, for instance personal pronouns like *I* and *you* (cf. Biber's 'involvement' features, 1988).

NOT-contractions, both quoted and original, particularly of DO and *can*, are also used intermittently in relative isolation in otherwise formal contexts. Writers do not seem to consider them as casual and informal as the AUX-forms and vary them quite freely with uncontracted forms (cf. for instance example (1)). This type of variation is outside the scope of this paper, but will be looked into more closely in my forthcoming dissertation; it might very well have a partly semantic explanation, as suggested by Tobin (1994: 153–163) and Hiller (1984: 257, 279), or be due to 'interactive rules' influencing the writers' preferred forms in the dialogue with their readers, as implicit in Yaeger-Dror (1996).

To conclude, I hope to have shown that regarding contracted forms from a rhetorical, discourse-related perspective—in addition to the traditional approach through overall register, or syntactic, prosodic, and semantic factors in the clause—can add a new dimension to our understanding of how they work.

Note

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