Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Aberdeen

Unit of Assessment: English Language and Literature

Title of case study: Language and Linguistic Evidence in the 1641 Depositions

1. Summary of the impact

In 2010 Fennell led an AHRC-funded multidisciplinary team developing new ways to analyse the digitised 1641 Irish Depositions corpus (AHRC-749-BF). The team developed an innovative collaborative research environment exchanging knowledge with IBM LanguageWare, Dublin, and modifying IBM's software to analyse variable, 'dirty' data. Investigating evidential quality, language development and the language of violence and atrocity in 8000 witness statements, the research advanced a prior AHRC-IRCHSS-funded digitization project, creating novel interactions with an early modern corpus and generating new insights into the Catholic-Protestant divide in Ireland and the UK which impact on current behaviour, policy and historical memory.

2. Underpinning research

The March 2010-April 2011 *Language and Linguistic Evidence in the 1641 Depositions* project brought together historical and forensic linguists, historians, computer scientists and digital humanities specialists to create a computer environment enabling linguists to work alone and collaboratively with other specialists and/or the general public to interrogate a unique and historically crucial corpus of 8000 witness statements on the Irish Rebellion in novel ways.

Exploiting the original AHRC/IRCHSS-sponsored digitised 1641 Depositions corpus, a previous collaboration between Aberdeen's Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies (RIISS) and Trinity College Dublin, the team developed language models for 17th-century English in Ireland and ontologies of 17th-century surnames and place names. It investigated localising morphological and lexical variants in mediated text, 17th-century legal discourse and the quality and nature of the evidence in the Depositions, concomitantly investigating the discourse of massacre, atrocity and genocide. The project's main deliverable output was the 1641 Collaborative Linguistic Research and Learning Environment (CLRLE: www.abdn.ac.uk/1641-depositions/), a suite of software, including IBM LanguageWare, enabling computer-aided analysis of the Depositions, and new methods of personalisation, visualisation and collaboration.

This semi-automated process allows researchers exhaustively and systematically to analyse the corpus in ways and time-spans previously not possible, and reinforces qualitative assertions about the language and the nature of the evidence with statistical analysis, permitting new and meaningful ways to display results. In knowledge exchange partnership with IBM LanguageWare, Dublin, the team adapted the IBM software to process variable and nonstandard language without normalising the corpus, providing new software insights through close interaction between linguists, software developers and analysts.

The Aberdeen 1641 project also investigated the role of women in the rebellion, developing 'lexical portraits' of women in war and revealing the discursive dehumanisation of Irish women and the victimisation of protestant women. This new lexical analytical and visualisation technique has been adopted by students and researchers to examine the language of atrocity and violence both in the past and present, and has been the subject of masters' and undergraduate theses in Ireland and the UK.

Finally, the research has illuminated ways in which evidence is altered when it is written down by third parties. This has led to an interdisciplinary bid for follow-on funding to compare scribal practice in the Depositions with the ways in which the Leveson interviews were rendered as written transcripts. Working with lawyers and law enforcement specialists, this project will use professional development workshops to investigate such practices with contemporary legal practitioners.

3. References to the research

Key Outputs

- 1641 Collaborative Linguistic Research and Learning Environment (CLRLE: www.abdn.ac.uk/1641-depositions/)

- Fennell, B A (2008). Standards, Attitudes and Variation in 18th Century Language Use: Sociolinguistic Parameters of Literary Dialect Investigation. In: *Unions and Divisions in 18th Century Language Use.* Proceedings of ISAI Conference, University of Aberdeen, 7-9 September, 2007. Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, pp. 59-70.

- Fennell, B A (2011). Dodgy Dossiers? Hearsay and the 1641 Depositions. *History Ireland* 19 (3): 26-29.

- Fennell, B A, and Macleod, N (2012). Lexico-Grammatical Portraits of Vulnerable Women in War: The 1641 Depositions. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 13 (2): 259-90.

- Fennell, B A, and Sweetnam, M (2012). Natural Language Processing and Early-Modern Dirty Data: Applying IBM LanguageWare to the 1641 Depositions. *Literary & Linguistic Computing* 27 (1): 29-54.

Research Grant

- The high quality of the underpinning research is demonstrated by the award of a £334,000 grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council programme Digital Equipment and Database Enhancement for Impact.

4. Details of the impact

Language and Linguistic Evidence in the 1641 Depositions was a one-year project which has had an impact in three specific areas: public understanding of the 1641 Rebellion and Catholic/ Protestant relations in Ireland and Scotland past and present; interactive digitally-supported research with a public engagement element; and understanding of the nature of written evidence, with implications for historical perception and current legal practice.

In terms of the 1641 Rebellion and Catholic/Protestant relations in Ireland and Scotland, the impact of the research was demonstrated initially by the large volume of international press attention. Public interest in the project included individuals contacting the team to ask for, or provide, information about ancestors or incidents in the Rebellion discussed in families. All 1641 events held in Dublin were full to capacity and the team also visited Wellesley College, Dublin, to demonstrate the project's web interface design to school pupils, and to introduce them to the background to the Rebellion and the Troubles.

Perhaps the biggest impact was achieved through the three invitations Fennell received to participate in *History Ireland* Hedge Schools on the 1641 Rebellion in Letterkenny, ROI (15.4.2011), Londonderry (17.4.2011) and Omagh, NI (12.5.2012). These hedge schools are designed around frank discussion between panel members and audiences which on each occasion comprised Protestants and Catholics, old and young, who were interested in specific incidents in the Rebellion and in the reliability of the witness testimony in the Depositions themselves, as well as in current interpretations of past events. Each event had over 50 participants, and the Derry event is available on-line from *History Ireland.* The Omagh event had been intended for Portadown, but the Portadown historical society had decreed that the subject was too 'explosive' to hold there, so *History Ireland* moved it to Omagh. After the Omagh event it emerged that some of the objectors from Portadown had been present in the audience and that they had been suitably

impressed by the measured dialogue and were considering inviting the group to the Orange Lodge in Portadown. This episode is a tangible demonstration of how the research has impacted positively on a community because of its strong contemporary resonance.

In a further initiative, insights into the divisive language of the Depositions have enabled Fennell (PI) and Michael Brown, current Director of RIISS, to link the research to current policy and practice regarding sectarianism in Scotland and Ireland, and to develop a series of Scottish-Irish 'conversations' bringing together scholars, practitioners and the public to debate challenging contemporary issues in the two countries such as housing, aging, youth culture and education. The first was a Scottish-Irish Conversation on Sectarianism held at the Scottish Parliament Festival of Politics on 17 August 2012. This event attracted more than 50 attendees from Scotland and Ireland. Both Fennell and Brown were interviewed by journalists and reports appeared, among other places, in the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Express*, and on Original 106 Radio.

The web design was developed in consultation with potential end-users (academics, librarians, computer specialists, pupils and lay persons). The interface allows four different levels of access to the Depositions: casual/non-specialist users, novice researchers, experienced researchers and administrators. It permits users to search for their ancestors, their family name, by place name, by named individual and by type of event. It allows searches by key word, enabling its exploitation by e.g. cultural historians, linguists and anthropologists. Users can, depending on their level of access, mount their own 'exhibits' on the website. The site has been used by school pupils, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and other researchers. It has spawned a number of theses, essays and informal studies, and led indirectly to a Trinity College project, CULTURA, which involves similar knowledge exchange with SMEs and IBM and focuses on individualizing the research experience by tailoring software to different levels of users. Mark Sweetnam, a postdoctoral fellow on the Aberdeen 1641 project, now works on CULTURA, as does Seamus Lawless, who was consultant to the Aberdeen project, continuing the ethos of the 1641 project into this new venture.

The project also has implications for current legal and law enforcement practice, as it enhances our understanding of the manipulation of evidence by third parties involved in the rendering another's words as evidence. A follow-on project led by Fennell (with Alison Johnson of Leeds University, lawyers from the University of Aberdeen, a self-employed software designer, a self-employed lawyer and the Yorkshire police) will compare practices in recording the evidence in the 1641 Depositions with those employed in rendering the Leveson inquiry live interviews into transcripts, identifying procedures that potentially alter the quality of evidence. The findings will inform two professional development workshops for English and Scottish lawyers and police officers to discuss the impact of such practices on current evidentiary practice.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact
1. PRESS BOOK: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/1641-depositions/uploads/files/1641%20press%20book%20Feb.pdf

2. *History Ireland* Hedge School on the 1641 Depositions at Tower Museum, Derry, 17 April 2011. Recording. http://www.historyireland.com/1641-rebellion/the-1641-depositions/

3. Press Release for 'Scottish-Irish Conversations on Sectarianism', 8th Annual Festival of Politics 2012.

4. 'Professor in Bigotry Plea to Holyrood' (newspaper article on the 'Scottish-Irish Conversations'), *The Herald*, 17 August 2012.

5. Corroborative evidence in support of the University's involvement in the Scottish Parliament's Festival of Politics is available from the HEI on request.