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Lexical Obsolescence and Loss:

The Case of Early Modern English (1500–1700)

Lexikální mortalita v rané moderní angličtině (1500–1700)

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1 Introduction

The unprecedented influx of new words during the Early Modern English period was accompanied by the obsolescence or loss of a large portion of the word-stock. However, literature on the subject has been primarily concerned with new additions to the vocabulary, while lexical obsolescence and loss in English remains under-researched, with several notable exceptions (Visser 1949, Görlach 1991). The phenomenon has been studied in other languages and dialects, including Rini (1990) and Dworkin's (1995) studies on obsolescence in Old Spanish and Gilman's (1979) research on lexical loss in Cameroon Pidgin. Cited as possible causes of obsolescence are factors such as language contact, analogical change, and homonymic/synonymic conflict, but it has proven difficult to separate the individual causes, since "the number of concurrent factors involved [in lexical obsolescence] often makes it difficult or impossible to reconstruct the specific causes that have led to the loss of an individual word." (Görlach 1991: 140)

The objective of this thesis is to examine the role of lexical obsolescence and loss in the development of English using authentic examples from Early English Books Online (EEBO), a 700-million-word corpus covering the period 1420–1710. Similar studies (Tichý 2021, Rudnicka 2019, Tichý 2018a; Tichý and Čermák 2015) cover obsolescence in the Old English, Middle English, and Late Modern English periods, and are comparable to this thesis both in scope and methodology. In extension to earlier research by Görlach (1991) and Visser (1949), this thesis proposes a systematic classification of obsolescent forms— both in terms of the degree of their obsolescence and the circumstances of their decline. The aim is to design a clearly structured scheme which could be utilized in contemporary lexicography and English dictionaries.

By *lexical obsolescence* we understand a word's decline from a previously productive state towards disappearance. For an item to be considered *obsolescent*, "there should be a visible negative correlation between the time and the frequency of use," (Rudnicka 2019: 6) whereas the adjective *obsolete* describes the final stage of obsolescence that is complete disappearance from active use in both spoken and written language. It is the *obsolete* items that are the focus of this thesis, i.e., words which had once been common but disappeared from the EEBO corpus over the course of the Early Modern period. This does not include the disappearance of coinages such as *nonce words, latent words and ghost words* (Read 1978: 95-6) since they were never fully integrated into the lexicon.

2 Characterizing Early Modern English

Early Modern English was extremely varied, particularly in spelling and pronunciation, leading to a fragmentation or "brokenness" that was commented upon by contemporary scholars (Blank 2006: 214). The divisions and language barrier in English were primarily based on education, region, and trade, and provided the motivation for the first English dictionaries of 'hard words' and technical terms as a means of social reform, making the vocabulary accessible to any literate speaker of English.

Over the course of the Early Modern period, English usage became increasingly standardized due to institutions such as the royal Chancery and the Royal Society of London, which came to represent authorities for standard usage. With the advent of the printing press in the late 15th century, these language norms could spread at an unprecedented pace as the printed texts were distributed throughout the population.

2.1 *Early Modern English grammar*

Early Modern English pronunciation is best characterized by the Great Vowel Shift, which took place over the course of several centuries and affected all long vowels in English. Other processes include the system-wide addition of phonemic /ŋ/ and /ʒ/ to the inventory of phonemes, the disappearance of /t/ and /d/ from consonant clusters with /s/, in words like *castle* and *handsome*, or the loss of word-initial /g/ and /k/, as in *gnaw* and *knight* (Millward and Hayes 2012: 247).

In older varieties of English, the correspondence between phoneme and grapheme was relatively straightforward, with regional spellings reflecting local pronunciations (Corrie 2006: 89). The wide dissemination of print caused the written form to resist variation mirroring gradual shifts in pronunciation. By 1650, English spelling had become fixed in the printed media and reflected the sounds of London and southern dialects, with old spelling variants becoming obsolete.

Developments in morphology between the Old English and Early Modern period can be summarized as the levelling and loss of inflectional endings as the language became increasingly analytic. These systemic changes had led to the loss of numerous forms, for example the dative *kinges* and nominative plural *eyen* (eyes). As for the distinction between the familiar *thou/thee* and polite *yee/you* second person singular pronouns, the preference for the formal “you” was so overwhelming that the informal *thou/thee* fell out of use completely (Gelderen 2006: 167).

As for syntax, Early Modern English word order was already fixed due to the levelling and loss of the most inflectional endings over the course of the previous centuries. The most notable changes in syntactic structure in this period include the obsolescence of double definite determiners, the rise of auxiliary *do*, the gradual disappearance of double negation from the main dialect, and subject-verb inversion in declarative sentences.

2.2 *Early Modern English vocabulary*

At the onset of the Early Modern period, English was in a precarious position due to the dominance of classical Latin, whose influence permeated religious discourse, legislature, and education. There were efforts to remedy English’s lack of terminology for specialized spheres, resulting in the advent of numerous borrowings and coinages. Due to heavy language contact between English and other languages, lexical borrowings constituted the bulk of new vocabulary in the 16th and 17th centuries, most of which came to English from Romance languages (OED 2014). This involved the new word being used in its original form or combined with a native (or

nativized) derivational affix. Next to lexical borrowings, the coinage of new words using elements of predominantly native origin was also widespread. The most productive word formation strategies available at the time were compounding, derivation, and conversion (sometimes referred to as zero derivation).

The lack of prescriptivist forces meant that the control over production was limited and the process of word-formation was much freer, resulting in a multitude of forms. Many coinages were in competition with their more established synonymous counterparts, so their survival depended on how readily they were accepted by the speech community. Overall, the Early Modern period was a time of linguistic innovation and disregard for economy of forms, even resulting in the existence of synonyms such as *to glad*, *gladden*, *englad*, *engladden*, and *beglad* (Görlach 1991: 172), which would ultimately lead to the survival of only one form and the obsolescence of many.

3 *Mechanisms of language change*

3.1 *The language-external and -internal dichotomy*

The causes of language change are traditionally divided into the categories of external and internal. Language-external catalysts are the real-world circumstances of a language community which bring about changes in linguistic behaviour, while language-internal causes stem from the language's inherent processes and structural properties. The practicality of this dichotomy has been called into question (Fischer 2007: 32) since language change is often a result of an interplay of internal and external factors.

3.2 *Language-external mechanisms: Sociolinguistic context*

Alongside language contact in the more learned spheres, there was a great deal of trade, exploration, and colonial expansion taking place in the Early Modern period, which led to an array of new varieties of English in the places where new English settlements formed as well as borrowings entering English via contact with the native languages.

On home soil, one of the key political events leading to language change was the English Civil War of 1642-1651, a period characterized by the breakdown of censorship and uncontrolled publication of books and pamphlets by whoever had the resources for it (Knowles 1997: 97). The lack of censorship made it possible to disseminate texts by a large number of authors, inevitably increasing the degree of variation present in printed English at the time whilst simultaneously making it accessible to a wide reading public.

As the political climate changed, the power and prestige shifted to the middle class, resulting in emphasis on politeness (Klein 1993: 36-7) that can be witnessed throughout the Early Modern period. It encouraged the propagation of euphemistic language and the avoidance of direct or explicit language related to taboo subjects such as sexuality, bodily functions, illness, and death,

which not only resulted in semantic shifts and the appearance of new words, but also potentially led to the obsolescence of words originally associated with the undesirable and vulgar concepts.

The Early Modern period saw a significant shift in the perception of learned discourse. The preferred style of writing in the Elizabethan period was extravagant, whereas the years following the Restoration were defined by purity and simplicity of discourse (Knowles 1997: 103). Correspondingly, this led to the obsolescence of countless superfluous terms. Illustrative of changing attitudes towards usage is John Locke's *Essay*, which comments on the abuse of language, in the form of irresponsible coinage and incorrect use of words (1689: 208-9).

By the end of the Early Modern English period, the language reflected the social and political unrest, which was brought by years of civil war, the Reformation, the Scottish and Irish rebellions. There was a general sense that language was in a state of chaos, with too much creativity and unrestrained freedom. The prescriptivist zeitgeist of the 18th century is reflected in an increased pressure to use the forms deemed most desirable (Fisiak 1993: 118-9) and also in the quantity of grammars produced at the time.

3.3 *Language-internal mechanisms*

The mechanisms described below lend themselves to the language-internal perspective in that they are not necessarily limited to the domain of language at all, but rather they are tendencies that permeate all aspects of human cognitive processing. (Bybee 2015: 238-9)

The tendency to conserve cognitive and articulatory energy leads to a *reduction of effort* and the closely related *automation of production*, which Bybee (2015: 238) cites as one of the leading causes of sound change. These processes have been shown to affect mostly high-frequency items, since they are both familiar and frequent enough to be understood regardless of more variation or reduced salience.

Chunking, the tendency to process more than one item together, especially high-frequency phrases, is yet another example of exerting the least cognitive effort as the chunk undergoes "internal phonetic reduction and fusion" (Bybee 2015: 124). The chunking tendency in turn factors into *grammaticalization*, a complex process that simultaneously affects every aspect of the construction in question; its spelling, pronunciation, grammatical function, and meaning.

The *effects of frequency*, work in the opposite direction, as high-frequency items are more resistant to change (Bybee 2015: 238). The inclination towards *generalization* can manifest as the preference for productive or frequent patterns not only when assigning them to completely new items, but even by replacing irregular or low-frequency patterns. *Analogy* effectively results in a simplification of a given pattern or paradigm within the system (McMahon 1994: 70), for instance the plural ending <-s>, which became the dominant paradigm between Middle and Early Modern English.

Iconicity is the principle dictating that language should reflect the extralinguistic experience as accurately as possible (McMahon 1994: 85-6) while *linguistic economy* tends to eradicate

ambiguity and phenomena such as homonymy and superfluous synonymy (Hogg and Denison 2006: 39).

4 Methodology

A corpus-driven methodology with frequency and distribution as the main criteria was used to establish an inventory of items from the Early English Books Online (EEBO) corpus that hypothetically became obsolete towards the end of the Early Modern period. In the corpus-driven research of Tichý (2018a), the frequency-based algorithm proved to be effective in extracting obsolescence candidates from the corpus. In this study, a table of EEBO words and their respective frequencies were processed by decade using a Python script to retrieve potentially obsolete items. If a given word occurred more than 50 times in the first 14 decades (1470-1609) and simultaneously had zero hits in the final six decades (1660-1719), it was appended to the list of possible candidates for obsolescence. With these restrictions the script returned a list of 851 candidates.

There were some issues inherent to the data that allowed many incorrectly identified candidates to slip through the script's filter and required additional manual sorting and removal of unsuitable candidates. This included typos or spelling variants (unclear whether present in original data or produced by transcribers), incorrectly recognized symbols, and incorrectly assigned part-of-speech tags due to the expected error rate of the morphological tagger (Mueller 2009: 14). The discarded candidates contained incorrectly transcribed characters (h3, 9clude), words with the placeholder symbol (t●e), roman numerals, incorrectly parsed words (the|holy), and obsolete spelling variants (*knouledge*, *hnowledge*, *knewledge*). False positives found due to incorrectly assigned part-of-speech tags include the noun *spretes* (spirits), which was assigned the verb tag, and similarly *kyngis* (king's) was tagged as a foreign word.

5 Analysis of obsolete forms

Once the candidates returned by the algorithm had been manually validated and typos, obsolete spelling variants and other false positives had been discarded, a detailed analysis was conducted on the remaining 39 words whose frequencies were indicative of obsolescence and an additional 9 obsolete items which were found in relation to the candidates.

The analysis included the forms *travalier* (n.), *Caluine* (n.), *debonayr* (adj. & n.), *imbroccata* (n.), *meyny* (n.), *borrow* (n. & adj.), *otherwise* (n.), *ordnance* (v.), *rosicleer* (n.), *cubyte* (n.), *caplm* (n.), *unmeet* (adj.), *conduit* (v.), *thylk* (adj. & pron.), *commise* (v.), *reappose* (v.), *putcase* (n.), *pylle* (v.), and *thesayde* (v.). While some candidates were more frequent in the initial decades (before the year 1500), the majority of the candidates peaked in the period 1530–1600, which suggests that these forms entered the English language and existed for a century or so before disappearing towards the end of the Early Modern period.

The cases of obsolescence included those likely caused by the disappearance of the word's referent, such as *borrow* (adj.) and *transhaw* (adj.), or the existence of several synonyms with

little or no divergence in meaning, such as the noun *travailer*, which coexisted in Early Modern English with the nouns *worker* and *labourer*. Similarly, obsolescence was found within groups of words differing only in their affixes, such as the abstract nouns *debonairity*, *debonairness*, and *debonair*.

Several cases of partial obsolescence were also observed, where loss took place in the main dialect, but the word survived as a regional variant, such as *meyny*, now limited to the Scottish and Irish varieties of English, and *thylk*, which is present in dialects around Cornwall and the West Midlands in the forms *thick*, *thicky*, *thickee*, or *thicka*. Furthermore, there were instances of obsolescence limited to a single word class in a derivational family, such as *otherwise* (n.) which remains in use as an adverb and adjective, and *ordnance* (v.), where the noun is still extant, though limited to a specific domain of military words.

A curious case of obsolescence was found in *reappose* (v.), which disappeared in the early 17th century until it appeared in a medical text in 1918, though it is unclear whether those responsible for the reinstatement of *reappose* were aware of the existence of the closely related obsolete word. The data also showed the disappearance of words which had been used exclusively by one author or group of authors (possibly linked to one printing house), such as *thesayde* (v.), *thenemy* (n.) and *thimperial* (j.), though it is unclear whether these should be cited as cases of true obsolescence due to their idiosyncratic usage.

6 Classification of obsolete forms

6.1 Earlier classifications

A preliminary classification is provided by Görlach (1991), who summarizes the main causes of word loss with reference to Visser (1949) as the main source on this topic. The causes of lexical obsolescence mentioned by Görlach (1-9) and Visser (10-13) are as follows:

- 1) disappearance of the word's original referent,
- 2) word is restricted to a dialect,
- 3) weakening of emphasis through overuse,
- 4) political correctness and use of euphemisms,
- 5) homonymic or homophonic conflict,
- 6) polysemy,
- 7) phonic inadequacy,
- 8) word formation patterns are no longer productive,
- 9) levelling of endings,
- 10) language contact,
- 11) synonymy,
- 12) social levelling,
- 13) fashionable language or slang words.

6.2 Proposed classifications

Based on the 48 candidates (39 obsolete items from the EEBO and an additional 9 found in connection to them), the proposed methods of classification take into account both the causes of lexical obsolescence as defined by Visser (1949) and Görlach (1991), as well as the concrete ways in which obsolescence takes place, ranging from obsolescence of spelling to the complete obsolescence of form and function.

The first system of classification is based on **cause and realization**. The dimension of realization was included alongside the previously cited language-internal and -external causes of obsolescence, since realization shows concrete ways in which the loss of a lexical item takes place. Depending on how strictly one wishes to define lexical obsolescence, the different types of realization may be understood as degrees of obsolescence or, in some cases, steps leading to full obsolescence.

In efforts to acknowledge that obsolescence is not simply binary but can have different **realizations**, I have proposed a cline of various stages of obsolescence based on the degree of word loss. The following four levels were defined in the context of formal obsolescence:

1. **Full obsolescence**: disappearance of form and meaning, or replacement by synonym,
2. **Selective obsolescence**: disappearance of sememe or word class,
3. **Disappearance from standard usage**: restriction to historical or regional usages,
4. **Orthographic**: rebracketing, reanalysis and obsolescence of spelling.

The **language-external causes** were based on earlier classifications (Görlach 1991, Visser 1949). The most numerous categories were the disappearance of the original referent and language contact, whereas censorship/taboo and fashion/slang were not identified as causes for any of the candidates. Also following from earlier classifications were the categories for **language-internal causes** of obsolescence, where the category of synonymy was by far the most frequent, while the levelling of endings and polysemy were not found among the obsolete forms in the EEBO data.

In this dual classification, the components of **cause and realization** represent two ways of looking at the same issue and tendencies have been observed regarding how cause and realization relate to one another. In the analysis of the results, it was often found that a word's decline may be attributed to the interplay of several causes, for instance, language contact (*language-external cause*) and the resulting borrowing frequently led to synonymy (*language-external cause*) and the replacement of one word by its synonym (*realization of obsolescence*).

The second proposed classification of obsolescence works with the perspective of **form and function** and how these are affected. This may be characterized by *Unsustainability* and *Duality*. *Unsustainability* can be further split into *Inadequacy* (the form or the concept is no longer viable), *Perception* (shift in the perception of language users leading to a – to some degree – conscious decision) and *Modification* (a shift on the paradigmatic or structural level).

7 *Discussion*

The methodology for the extraction of potentially obsolete words involved setting constraints for word's minimum frequency in the earlier decades, and determining conditions under which an item could be considered obsolete. The requirement was a minimum frequency of 50 occurrences in the first 14 decades (1470-1609), which was so that all obsolescence candidates would be words with frequencies above 1 i.p.m., corresponding to the OED's (2021) frequency bands 5 (restricted to educated discourse but still understandable) to 8 (common words in everyday use). In order to extract only items where obsolescence was indisputable, the candidates also had to meet the condition of zero hits in the final six decades (1660-1719), where the boundary was set to correspond with the onset of a more utilitarian approach to language.

The time periods in the Early English Books Online (EEBO) corpus are defined in 10-year increments, though language change is not so straightforward. For more meaningful time periods, an alternative route might be data-driven periodization, using Kullback-Leibler Divergence (or relative entropy) method (Degaetano-Ortlieb and Teich 2018: 30) or a sliding window sampling method as a way of achieving balanced time intervals with the same number of tokens (Tichý 2018b: 34). Such an approach promises to more accurately determine periods in the corpus where obsolescence was most pervasive as well as providing an alternative method for identifying obsolescent words or constructions.

Although the EEBO corpus is a representation of all Early Modern English printed texts, it excludes personal correspondence and many other text types. Therefore, corpus likely contains words which did become obsolete in the later decades of the Early Modern period but went undiscovered by the present methodology due to frequencies lower than 50 in the earlier decades. Conversely, although zero-frequencies indicate that a word became obsolete, it cannot be claimed with certainty that it disappeared from the language entirely, but rather it became obsolete within the scope of the corpus.

An important feature of the EEBO corpus is that the spelling has been normalized only to an extent. Since the interest of this research lay outside of orthographic variation, the fact that the spelling in the EEBO corpus was only partially normalized has resulted in two issues. Firstly, since over the course of the Early Modern period spelling gradually became more standardized, the later decades saw a decrease in the spelling variants per word, which the frequency-based script translated to a high number of outdated spelling variants of extant words, resulting in a rather lengthy manual post-processing to see if the form at hand in fact was just an outdated spelling and not another separate lexical item. Secondly, the frequencies provided in the normalized data from Northwestern University did not always perfectly correspond to the frequencies found for the same word in the Czech National Corpus. This raises the question of how insufficiently normalized spelling might have skewed the numbers, and due to the high numbers of orthographic representations of one lexical item we can only speculate how many cases of obsolescence went undiscovered.

One of the main goals of this thesis was to propose a lexicographical classification of obsolescence that would be clearly structured and unambiguous without being overly cumbersome. Given the frequent interplay of factors leading to formal obsolescence, it has been useful to distinguish between cause and realization, with a distinction between language-external and -internal causes, since it is often that one leads to the other.

Applying the classification presented some challenges, including such cases of marginal obsolescence as words obsolete in the main dialect but remaining on the periphery. This may be remedied by perceiving obsolescence as a cline or spectrum that ranges from spelling obsolescence to marginal obsolescence (limited to dialect or word class) and finally to full obsolescence of form and meaning. In other cases, there was uncertainty as to the possible cause of obsolescence, leaving the option of choosing a) one primary cause which is (subjectively) the most salient, or b) the first identifiable factor in a chain of causes leading to a form's obsolescence or, c) the last identifiable factor.

An invaluable next step would be to user test the viability of the proposed systems of classification and measure their success when applied to obsolescence in different periods, or even different languages. Other possible extensions to the topic include applying the methodology to an unlemmatized version of the same corpus, which would result in a more exhaustive list of obsolescence candidates. Another possible improvement might be the use of alternative candidate mining strategies, including data-driven periodization for a better delimitation of the time periods in which significant language change took place. Finally, the inclusion of n-grams would allow the examination not only of obsolete word forms but entire collocations or grammatical constructions.

8 Conclusion

Given that lexical obsolescence is a relatively under-researched topic, there is little else available aside from the two key sources (Visser 1949; Görlach 1991: 139-143) that might help sort obsolete words into coherent categories and prepare a system of classification. This thesis set out to map the key factors which most likely contributed to lexical obsolescence and loss in Early Modern English, and as a second step propose a classification framework for this phenomenon using authentic examples from the Early English Books Online corpus.

Using a corpus-driven method, a preliminary list was compiled which featured 851 words whose frequencies indicated that they likely became obsolete over the course of the Early Modern period. Following manual sorting, a total of 48 items were evaluated as instances of true obsolescence and subsequently analyzed in detail.

In addition to the *internal* and *external causes* of lexical obsolescence as defined by Visser (1949) and Görlach (1991), the proposed classification includes the perspective of *realization*, i.e., the concrete manifestation of obsolescence in the language. The parameter of *realization* suggests that obsolescence might be treated as a cline.

The second proposed classification is concerned with the form and function of a given word, and how those may be characterized in terms of obsolescence. In relation to form and function, this classification method distinguishes between the effects of *duality/competition* (e.g., synonymy) and *unsustainability* (e.g., disappearance of the original referent), the latter of which may further split it into *inadequacy*, *perception* and *modification*.

The data-driven approach used in the initial stages of this research proved essential to the gathering of sufficient examples of obsolescence and the compilation of a comprehensive classification framework. Moving from theory to practice, a crucial next step in this research is testing the viability of the proposed classification of lexical obsolescence with the help of lexicographers and dictionary users, with the aim of reaching a balance between complexity and applicability.

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10 Research activities

Publications

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Grants

(2020–2022) *Adjectival postposition in English* [research work for grant]. GA ČR 19-05631S, Principal Investigator: PhDr. Pavlína Šaldová, Ph.D.

(2016) *Online tutorial for work with the EEBO corpus* [research work for grant]. VG 2016, Valentínyová, K. and V. Volná. (<https://wiki.korpus.cz/doku.php/en:kurz:uvod>)

Teaching

(2017-2018) *Chapters in the History of the English Language*, course for M.A. students at Metropolitan University Prague