

Abstract

Literature dealing with the development of the English lexicon has been concerned primarily with new additions to the language's vocabulary, such as borrowings, coinages and word formation patterns, while the topic of lexical obsolescence and loss remains under-researched. In the Early Modern period, the rate at which new lexical items appeared in the English language was unprecedented, especially in the years 1590-1620, as documented in the Oxford English Dictionary's online Timelines feature. In tandem with the rapid expanding lexicon, there was a portion of the vocabulary that was undergoing obsolescence or complete disappearance. Over the course of the Early Modern period, English lost a significant portion of its word-stock, including those short-lived coinages or borrowings which had entered the language only several decades or centuries earlier.

Using authentic examples from the EEBO (Early English Books Online) corpus, this dissertation provides an insight into the role of lexical obsolescence and loss in the development of Early Modern English. Based on frequency data, a list of candidates for obsolescence has been generated featuring words such as *sacerdote* (lat.), *travalier* (fr.), and *breastlap* (en.), all of which were common at the onset of the Early Modern period but had disappeared by the end of the 17th century, likely due to competition with another already existing, more widespread and perhaps more native-sounding synonym.

Although near synonymy and polysemy are identified as the basic catalysts for obsolescence, other relevant factors include the disappearance of the word's original referent, weakening of emphasis through overuse, and political correctness. The most promising candidates were selected and the conditions accompanying the decline of these forms analyzed and discussed. Building on the examples drawn from the EEBO as well as previous classifications by Visser (1949) and Görlach (1991), several potential systems of classification are proposed for lexical obsolescence, taking into account form and function, language-internal and -external processes, as well as the real-world manifestation of obsolescence.

Key words

Early Modern English, lexical obsolescence, EEBO, classification of obsolescence