NEOLOGISMS IN EARLY ENGLISH LETTERS

THE CASE OF -ITY

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• Interfacing structured and unstructured data in sociolinguistic research on language change (Academy of Finland, DIGIHUM, 2016–2019)

• My subproject with Eetu Mäkelä & Jukka Suomela (Aalto University): Social embedding of neologisms in early English correspondence

• Previous research: mostly lexicographical data (OED), bias towards well-known authors

• Corpora of Early English Correspondence: wide social spectrum, speech-like genre
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Who are the innovators? Which social groups do they represent?
2. How do the new words spread socially, geographically and diachronically?
3. Which semantic domains do the neologisms represent?
4. Why are the neologisms created and established? Can they be linked to:
   - Specific historical events?
   - Changes in culture & society?
   - Social meanings?
CHALLENGES

- **Identification** of neologisms
  - Spelling variation…

- Automatic retrieval of related *lexicographical* data
  - *Oxford English Dictionary*: e.g. first attestation dates, etymologies
  - *Historical Thesaurus*: time-sensitive semantic domains

- **Interface** for pruning the possible neologisms found
PILOT STUDY: C18 NEOLOGISMS IN -ITY

- *ness & -ity*: derive nouns from adjectives
  - e.g. *generous* → *generousness / generosity*
- *ness* native, *-ity* borrowed from French & Latin → connotations associated with those languages (e.g. polite society, learned, scientific)

- Previous research (*Säily 2014*): productivity of *-ity* increases throughout C17–18, perhaps led by male professionals

- End of C18: *-ity* highly productive – what kinds of neologisms by whom?

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15 NEOLOGISMS FOUND, 1760–1800

• Working definition of neologism: corpus attestation max 100 years after OED first attestation date
  • 3 antedatings, 3 not in OED at all

• authenticity, cleverality (1778<1828), comicality, conviviality (1783<1791), coxcombicality, foxity (1788), Germanity (1788<1821), impracticability, intrepidity, irritability, oddity, respectability, ridiculability (1776), scoundrellity (1761), versatility
WHO ARE THE INNOVATORS?

- **Thomas Twining**, clergyman, classical scholar (c.1734–1804)
  - *coxcombicality*, *foxity*, *Germanity* 1788, *ridiculability* 1776

- **Charles Burney**, musician, author (1726–1814)
  - *conviviality* 1783, *versatility* 1782
  - Daughter **Fanny Burney** (author, 1752–1840) uses *conviviality* 1799

- **David Garrick**, actor, playwright (1717–1779)
  - *comicality* 1767, *scoundrellity* 1761

- **Ignatius Sancho**, author (1729?–1780)
  - *cleverality* 1778
WHAT DO THEY DO WITH THE NEOLOGISMS?

... there is not among any set of people such a comfortable scratch-back confederacy as among those old ruin-diggers [antiquarians & old-English grubbers]. Is it the consciousness of enemies & scoffers all round them – the sour’d feeling of *ridiculability* – that draws the knot closer and forms the phalanx, back to back, for mutual scrubbing & defence?

Thomas Twining to Charles Burney, 1776

It is a most infamous design, & I desir’d Churchill would Let Thornton know of it, which he will do immediatly, & prevent their *Scoundrillity* by some humourous Paragraph …

David Garrick to George Colman, 1761
I have always thought, that in many particulars his equal was not to be found – his wit, learning, taste, penetration; & when well, his conviviality, pleasantry, – & kindness of heart to me & mine, will ever be thought of, with the most profound & desponding regret!

Charles Burney to Fanny Burney, 1783?

The account of the Play meriting little attention indeed – I am much pleased at your independent establishment of conviviality at Burlington House.

Fanny Burney to Charles Burney, 1799
CONCLUSION

• 18ᵗʰ-century neologisms in -ity
  • Innovators: men in their 40s–50s, professional / other non-gentry, creative, writing to close friends or family
  • Often words describing people, designed to amuse & perhaps impress recipient – linked to writing style, spread in social network of peers

• Future work: expand to all neologisms, longer time period → need to (semi-)automate identification & classification
  • Probably impossible to closely follow spread of individual words – what to do instead?

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