

NEOLOGISMS IN EARLY ENGLISH LETTERS

THE CASE OF *-ITY*

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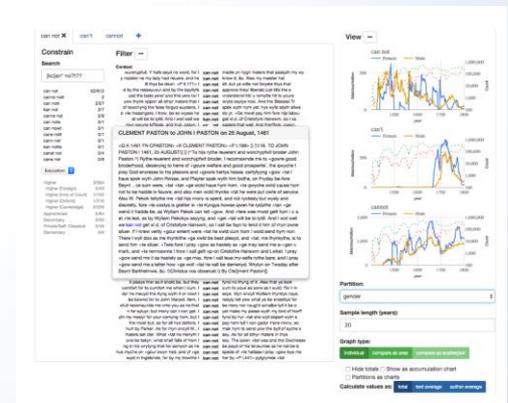
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STRATAS PROJECT

- *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



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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?



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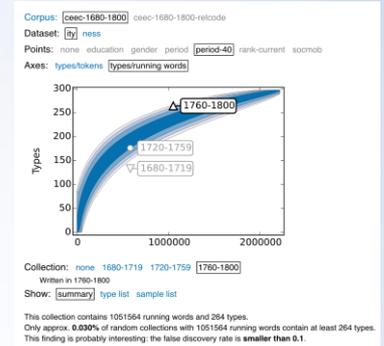


CHALLENGES

- **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?



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



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HOW DO NEOLOGISMS SPREAD?

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



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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?

