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Formulaic Sequences in Early Modern English: A Corpus-driven Historical Pragmatic Study

Despite the fact that language is creative, people also use large amount of fixed, cliched, situation-based multi-word units, or Formulaic Sequences (FSs), to say things and/or to perform certain speech acts (e.g. "despite the fact that…"). FSs in Present-Day English (PDE) have been studied exhaustively, but FSs in historical texts are still an understudied topic. Were there also a lot of FSs in English of earlier periods? If there were, were they the same as, or different from, those in PDE? What role have FSs played in the change of English?

This PhD project aims at making further contribution to research on FSs in Early Modern English (EModE) and intends to determine what pragmatic functions FSs served in EModE and how FSs characterised different EModE text-types. More specifically, with a corpus-driven approach, the project compares the use of FSs in face-to-face communication (both authentic dialogues, e.g. court proceedings, and constructed dialogues, e.g. plays) and written communication (letters).

To search for FSs in a corpus, a two-phase procedure is followed: firstly, lexical bundles (LBs) are computationally derived from the corpus; secondly, FSs are identified manually on the basis of LBs by examining the context in which these bundles occur. Reasons behind this two-phase procedure are that in spite of a useful way to investigate FSs in a massive amount of historical texts, LBs are, to some extent, different from FSs by definition; briefly, LBs are only frequency based, while FSs are more complicated and diverse in terms of the degree of idiomaticity and syntactic regularity. Besides, LBs lack context and are often semantically and syntactically incomplete. Therefore, though LBs could review some recurring patterns, they could not describe the whole picture of FSs.

Analysis centres on the form, pragmatic function and statistic distribution of FSs in EModE dialogues and letters. It is expected to find that certain pragmatic functions are served by different FSs in different registers, for instance in formal registers such as court proceedings and business letters and in informal registers such as chats and private letters. Extralinguistic factors such as the profession, age, social rank of the contributors to the texts are also taken into consideration.