Mgr. Veronika Volná
Lexical Obsolescence and Loss: The Case of Early Modern English (1500–1700)
2023, Department of English Language and ELT Methodology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 118 pp.
(opponent's review)

A brief synopsis

The content of the dissertation is original and relevant. The study concentrates on the evolution of the English lexicon, with the main focus put on the examination of the role of lexical obsolescence and loss during the Early Modern era. The text is well-organized and clearly structured. It comprises an introduction, six main chapters, a conclusion, and a satisfactory list of references. Also included are a list of figures, a list of tables, and two appendices.

In the introduction, the author quickly introduces the reader to the aims of her research and provides a brief overview of individual chapters. Then she proceeds with the definition of lexical as well as grammatical obsolescence, commenting on the current state of research. Worth mentioning is the fact that she illustrates the phenomenon of lexical obsolescence and loss not just on the example of English but many other languages, including Berber, Turkish, or creolized languages such as Cameroon Pidgin.

The two chapters preceding the main textual body of the dissertation characterize Early Modern English (its linguistic typology) and outline processes of language change, with the focus given to both sociolinguistic context and language-internal mechanisms. Both sections contain the most relevant pieces of information and form a compact and useful base for further considerations.

Theory, methodology, corpus

The theoretical background is soundly articulated, showing the author's academic engagement and providing a thorough theoretical foundation for her research. The methodological approach – which has already been successfully tested as part of the analysis of Late Modern English vocabulary (see, e.g., Tichý 2021) – serves the established objectives well.

Volná applied a corpus-driven methodology with frequency and distribution as the main criteria. For the purposes of her analysis she took the advantage of Early English Books Online (EEBO), which is a collection of digitized manuscripts and early print books. The corpus is described in detail, including information on the process of building the corpus, data structure, tagging, etc.

Drawing on Tichý (2018) and his research, Volná processed the frequencies of EEBO words in order to extract obsolescence candidates from the corpus. After additional identification and validation of individual candidates, she managed to retrieve 48 obsolete items (39 words from the EEBO collection and an additional nine found in connection to them).

Results

The results of the analysis are presented in the form of several classifications of obsolete forms. Volná comments her corpus material on the background of earlier classifications introduced by Visser (1949) and Görlach (1991) and, at the same time, she outlines her own systems of classification. She proposes methods which "take into account the causes of lexical obsolescence as well as the concrete ways in which obsolescence takes place, ranging from obsolescence of spelling to the complete obsolescence of form and function".

Having discussed both the internal and external causes of lexical obsolescence, the candidate argues that obsolescence should be treated as a cline consisting of four levels of realization/manifestation: 1) full obsolescence, 2) selective obsolescence, 3) disappearance from standard

usage, and 4) orthographic. She also interprets lexical obsolescence from the perspective of form and/or function of a given word, and 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".

Academic style, language

The style and language used are appropriate. Throughout the study the candidate follows the principles of academic writing. The presentation is lucid and rigorous, with minor and infrequent typographic errors which, in my opinion, are due to the complex character (diachronic, statistical, corpus-driven etc.) of the presented language material.

Conclusion

In her dissertation, the author examines the development of the English lexicon in a particular period of time. The theoretical part of the thesis presents a scholarly overview of the topic, its main concepts, and related literature. The analytical part is well thought through and provides interesting insights into the functions and patterns of lexical obsolescence in Early Modern English. The results and findings concerning the classification of obsolete forms have the potential to enrich both the theory and practice of (English) lexicography.

Questions and discussion prompts

1. Political correctness is mentioned as one of the driving forces behind changes in the vocabulary. Can you provide more examples?

2. What are some generalizations that can be drawn from the comparison of Early Modern and Late Modern (English) lexical obsolescence and loss?

3. In your opinion, what other research tasks does the conducted investigation provide material or incentive for?

Based on what has been said, I suggest that the dissertation be admitted to the viva-voce and after successful defense the candidate be awarded the academic title of Ph.D.

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Doc. PhDr. Miroslav Černý, Ph.D.

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Opava, 31 July 2023