

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Veronika Volná
"Lexical Obsolescence and Loss: The Case of Early Modern English (1500–1700)"
Submitted in 2023 at the Department of English Language and ELT Methodology

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

This dissertation addresses the much under-researched topic of lexical obsolescence and loss. In particular, the primary objective is to propose two systems for the classification of obsolescent forms (cause/realization and form/function) considering both internal and external linguistic factors. To achieve this objective, the dissertation focuses on the Early Modern English period, which witnessed a significant reduction in lexical material. Methodologically, the study uses both corpus (*Early English Book Online*, EEBO) and lexicographic resources (*Oxford English Dictionary*, OED) for data extraction and analysis.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

Overall, this thesis makes a valuable contribution to the field, particularly in light of the limited existing research on lexical obsolescence and loss. Notably, its potential application within lexicography is of great interest, addressing the current ambiguity in the classification of obsolescent forms (e.g., the OED lacks sufficient information to distinguish labels such as *archaic*, *historical*, *obsolete*, or *rare*).

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

The overall structure is well-organized. The dissertation consists of eight chapters (including the 'Introduction' and the 'Conclusions' sections). The dissertation opens with an introductory chapter (Chapter 1) that offers a comprehensive overview of prior research, identifies the research gap, and outlines the thesis objectives and the methodology used. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a relevant outline of the features of Early Modern English and the mechanisms of language change.

Chapter 4 presents the sources and method employed for data collection and analysis, along with a description of the challenges posed by the use of historical corpora. The final sample of potential obsolete forms contains 48 lexical units, which may appear modest at first glance. However, considering the limitations of the corpus and the required criteria, as acknowledged by the author herself, the sample size is deemed appropriate. I think it is important to highlight (and value) the amount of tedious manual work necessary to process the data, both for discarding irrelevant units from the initial list of 851 forms and for the analysis of corpus concordances (considering the difficulties inherent to the task itself). There are some methodological aspects, or more precisely, issues pertaining to the description of the method, that would have benefited from some clarification. Specifically, it is not specified in Chapter 4 that the examples were retrieved from the EEBO interface

available through the Czech National Corpus. This detail is only briefly mentioned in Chapter 7, which makes confusing the interpretation of the results described in Chapter 5 since the frequencies provided in the text do not always align with the frequencies in the Appendix (e.g., on p. 69 *meyny* returns 377 hits in the corpus, but its frequency in the Appendix is 193).

Chapter 5 presents a more comprehensive analysis of some of the forms considered potential cases of obsolescence. However, the reasons for selecting only 22 forms (considering forms with different POS tags) out of the total 48 forms in the sample remain unclear. Is there a specific criterion for the selection of the forms described and not others? If not described in the chapter (for space/time limitations), it would have been advisable to list the 48 forms in the final Appendix, together with their corpus frequency. This would enhance transparency. However, the Appendix only contains the forms described in Chapter 5 (except *putcase_n*, which is addressed in section 5.1.17 yet omitted from the Appendix). Other forms from the sample are used as examples in Chapter 6 where applicable (e.g., p.93: *ne_v*; p. 92 *hackbutter_n*), although this requires to be somewhat interpreted by the reader.

Based on the data collected and building upon previous work by Visser and Görlach, Chapter 6 proposes two classifications for obsolete forms (cause/realization and form/function). I find particularly interesting the distinction that the author makes between cause and realization, but the description of the second system seems to me somewhat superficial. While the author acknowledges the need for user testing and evaluation (p. 108), a more comprehensive examination of the merits and drawbacks inherent to each classification would have been useful for their application. Table 15 is presented as an elaborated version of Table 14 (pp. 99–100), but there are I think some discrepancies: i) some processes in Table 15 are absent in Table 14 (“productivity/restrictions of WF pattern”, “weakening through overuse” and “disappearance in one word class”); ii) “fashion” is classified under “Function” in Table 14 but under “Form” in Table 15; and iii) “Cause” (internal and external) were distinguished from “Realization” in the first classification, but not in the second system. The latter also overlooks other causes and realizations mentioned in the chapter (e.g., language contact, dialectal/historical usage).

In Chapter 7, the author critically assesses the limitations of the corpus and method. Demonstrating a strong awareness of the method’s shortcomings, the author proposes potential improvements for future research, such as the use of an unlemmatized version of the corpus, exploring alternative mining strategies, or adopting a different approach to periodization. The chapter concludes by offering prospects for future work, thus supporting the relevance and future projection of the topic.

Regarding formal aspects, there is no list of abbreviations at the beginning. The number of references is appropriate considering that research into lexical loss is scarce. However, there are several formal infelicities that at some points disrupt the reading flow. These include typographical errors (e.g., p. 33 *practises>practices*; p. 38 *augmentations>argumentations*; p. 51 *staring>starting*; p. 60 *ever more>even more*), phrasing that requires revision (e.g., p. 27, para. 3, l. 4; p. 32 (para. 1 in section 3.2.4, ll. 4-5); p. 40 (para. 1 in section 3.2.7.2, l. 1)), and proofreading aspects, such as inconsistent use of

quotation marks for definitions (e.g., p. 36: para. 2 l. 9 vs e.g., p. 43: para. 3, ll. 1–2 from the bottom), italics (e.g. p. 37: “angel”, “messenger”; p. 60: “Edmund”; p. 107: “debonayr”). The language used is overall adequate. However, in some instances, the wording appears a bit informal (e.g., “embarrassing ambiguity”). Some references to previous works (e.g., p. 45 “devised to this purpose on earlier research”, “In previous studies”) or cross-references to tables and examples are missing (e.g., Table 3 on p. 55; example 8d on p. 56).

Overall, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to the under-researched topic of lexical obsolescence and loss. On the methodological level, the study builds upon previous research while adapting the method to align with the specific attributes of the corpus used. The choice of the period under study is well-justified and extends on previous related research conducted within the same department. On a theoretical level, the dissertation introduces two systems for categorizing obsolescent forms, with potential applications in lexicography.

IV. Questions for the author

- i) Regarding the two systems for the classification of obsolete forms proposed, **could you please elaborate on the advantages and the disadvantages of each of the systems proposed?**
- ii) I find the instances where there are gaps in attestation dates for certain words in the OED particularly intriguing. For example, *elsewise* (p. 71) is earliest attested in 1548–1549 and then again in 1864–1888 with the same meaning (it is also documented in the *Merriam Webster* and the COCA). Another example is *borrow* (n.), for which the OED itself indicates that the latest attestations in the 19th century are restricted to Scottish Law; or *reappose* (considered obsolete but attested again in the 20th century with an apparent shift in meaning), for which the questions about their status is left open (p. 107). Given these examples, **how should gaps in attestation dates be considered in relation to obsolescence?**

V. Conclusion

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

Prague, 10th August 2023

Cristina Fernández Alcaina