

It is more complex to read letters than drama (really?): on linguistic complexity and text-type variation in the recent history of English

Ana E. Martinez Insua (University of Vigo, Spain) and Javier Perez-Guerra (University of Vigo, Spain)

In this paper we undertake the study of structural and syntactic complexity in a selection of text types or genres (letters, news, drama) in the recent history of English. In particular, we focus on the complexity of nominal constituents functioning as (unmarked) subjects, objects or adjuncts in a representative sample of declarative sentences retrieved from a corpus of texts from 1750 to Present-day English, namely the British component of ARCHER (*A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*; Biber et al 1994). The subject- and the object-positions have been claimed (Davison & Lutz 1985:60, Gibson 1998:27) to be crucial as far as complexity and processing are concerned. In this research we also pay attention to the noun phrases which function as adjuncts (or predicate-modifiers) in an attempt to compare their degree of complexity with that evinced by the external (subjects) and the (internal) arguments.

In this investigation we assume (i) that text types can be graded in terms of complexity, (ii) that text types differ as regards their linguistic complexity both synchronically and diachronically, and (iii), following Taavitsainen's (2001:141) definition of genre or text type as "a codification of linguistic features", that structural and syntactic complexity can be measured out by means of linguistic variables. In this respect, we apply several metrics of complexification (size/length both of the whole construction and of the segments up to the core constituents or 'markers', syntactic density, syntactic depth, Hawkins' 1994/2004 'IC-to-word ratio' and 'on-line IC-to-word ratio', etc). Such metrics will measure the degree of linguistic complexity of the constituents and will allow us to place the text types on a scale of complexification, ready for the purposes of synchronic and diachronic comparison.

In this pilot study we have chosen the text types of letters, news and drama, which will be confronted to the same experiment. Aiming at focusing on written-to-be-read (and written-to-be-spoken) texts and trying to consider informal ('(possibly) speech-based') textual material, we concentrate on the analysis of three text types which can be taken as representative of such labels.

References

- Biber, Douglas, Edward Finegan and Dwight Atkinson (1994) "ARCHER and its challenges: compiling and exploring a representative corpus of historical English registers". Eds. Udo Fries, Gunnel Tottie and Peter Schneider. *Creating and using English language corpora*. Amsterdam: Rodopi (1-14).
- Davison, Alice and Richard Lutz (1985) "Measuring syntactic complexity relative to discourse context". Eds. David R. Dowty, Lauri Karttunen and Arnold M. Zwicky. *Natural language parsing. Psychological, computational, and theoretical perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (26-66).
- Gibson, Edward (1998) "Linguistic complexity: locality of syntactic dependencies". *Cognition* 68/1: 1-76.
- Hawkins, John A. (1994) *A performance theory of order and constituency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkins, John A. (2004) *Efficiency and complexity in grammars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taavitsainen, Irma (2001) "Changing conventions of writing: the dynamics of genres, text types, and text traditions". *EJES* 5/2: 139-50.