

Corpus-based or micro-scale – letters of denunciation in the 1820 settler correspondence

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Despite the immense body of research conducted within historical corpus linguistics and the groundbreaking character of some of the findings, the paper advocates an alternative approach to the study of 19th century English(es). It is claimed that micro-scale synchronic analyses of individual contributions to the linguistic diversity of the period are an essential, though a frequently neglected addition to the large-scale diachronic statistically oriented corpus investigations (such as e.g., Geisler 2003). For one thing, such micro studies may be a sheer necessity in the case of the diverging English language of the period under consideration. Secondly, unlike corpus-based approaches, studies based on individual texts do not immediately discard the issue of speaker agency in language transmission, variation and change (cf. Deumert 2003).

The paper seeks to provide a description of a selection of texts drawn from an immense body of official correspondence pertaining to the 1820 British settlement of the Cape of Good Hope. As established previously (Włodarczyk 2010), the 1820 settler candidates and settlers to a large extent followed the generic model of petition which evolved in Britain out of the so-called subscriptional genres. Some writers, however, reinforced their personal motives by means of denouncing others in their petitions. As the study shows, the letter of denunciation was by no means uncommon in the applications for the settlement plan or in the correspondence addressed to the Colonial Office in Cape Town. The relative distinctiveness of denunciation letters provides a promising incentive for linguistic investigation and discussion.

What attracts particular attention in the settler denunciation letters is their persuasive nature. After Virtanen and Halmari persuasion is seen as “attempts to either *change* the thinking or behavior of an audience, or to *strengthen* its beliefs, should the audience already agree” (2005: 3). Following selected points in Biber’s framework (1988), the paper seeks to establish the patterns of usage of infinitives, prediction modals and suasive verbs in the analysed letters. All of these features, seen as overt manifestations of persuasion, may also be additionally strengthened by means of request-making strategies analysed within the framework of speech act theory.

The findings of the paper show a range of discourse features and persuasion strategies recurring in the denunciation letter which may be viewed as a subgenre of petition, developed and elaborated in the new social context of the colonial settlement. Moreover, the paper emphasizes the significance of the reconciliation of the synchronic studies oriented at individual informants with selected aspects of large-scale corpus-based studies for the development of a comprehensive picture of variation in nineteenth century English(es).

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