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Sentence length as a style marker in 18th-century newspapers (the ZEN-Corpus)

Sentence length has been of interest in a variety of related fields, it has been discussed in newspaper style manuals, in studies of comprehension processes, in rhetorical studies (as early as the 18th century), and it has been analysed by Kucera and Francis (1967) as a meaningful variable of genre style. Informative prose texts use markedly longer sentences than imaginative prose. Sentence length cannot be studied without looking into sentence complexity as well. Paratactic structures are easier to comprehend than hypotactic ones.

The material for this study is taken from the ZEN Corpus (*The Zurich Corpus of Early English Newspapers*), which covers London newspapers from 1671 to 1791.

My hypothesis is that sentence length differs in newspaper English from sentence length in other genres, especially the more demanding journals of the period (*The Tatler*, *The Spectator*). Furthermore, I want to show that the development of *The London Gazette* from a regular newspaper to a journal of government proclamations is mirrored by sentence length and sentence complexity. Therefore, *The London Gazette* of the second half of the 18th century must only be used very carefully for stylistic comparisons with newspapers proper. Following Schneider (2002), who used a much smaller corpus, I want to find out whether differences in sentence length and sentence complexity can be used as a criterion to distinguish between ‘quality papers’ and the emerging ‘popular press’ of the 18th century.

Finally, I assume that the various text classes in newspapers (foreign news, ship news, proclamations, advertisements and others) will contribute to the overall picture of sentence length in the 18th century press and will be a useful basis for future comparative studies.

References

Kucera, Henry and W. Nelson Francis. 1967. *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English*. Providence, RI: Brown University Press.

Schneider, Kristina. (2002) *The Development of Popular Journalism in England from 1700 to the Present*. Unpubl. thesis, Rostock.