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Exploring Speech-related Early Modern English Texts: Lexical Bundles Re-visited

The study of 'fixed' expressions is receiving increasing attention within the corpus linguistics framework. Most studies have so far focused on present-day English, spoken (cf., e.g., Aijmer 1996, Hudson 1998) and written (cf., e.g., Moon 1998). Much less work has been done on linguistic fixedness in early English, despite the fact that the role of conventionalised expressions in the history of discoursal phenomena is becoming a popular area of study (e.g. Kopytko 1995; Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1995; Nevala 2004; Traugott 2001: chapter 4).

In an earlier study (Culpeper and Kytö 2002), we investigated the role played by recurrent word-combinations in a pilot version of the *Corpus of English Dialogues, 1560-1760*. Biber et al. (1999) refer to such recurrent expressions as 'lexical bundles'– computationally derived groups of words, where each word has a particular frequency of co-occurrence with other words in the group. There is no requirement that the bundles are structurally or semantically complete, and in fact they are usually not. In common with other studies (e.g. Altenberg 1998), we will focus on lexical bundles which consist of at least three words. Biber et al. (1999: 992) suggest that three-word bundles can be considered as a kind of extended collocational association. Once we derived our lexical bundles, we classified them according to function. Our functional classification was broadly based on Halliday's (e.g. 1994) three functional components of language: ideational, interpersonal and textual (see also Moon 1998).

In our present paper we will pursue this topic further, addressing the following research questions: (i) what were the recurrent types of lexical bundles characteristic of authentic and constructed dialogue of the period? (ii) how do they relate to particular functions; and (iii) how do they compare with those found in Present-day spoken English? Our study now has the benefit of a much more extensive collection of early texts drawn from the *Corpus of English Dialogues*. Furthermore, we will make comparisons with data drawn from a comparative corpus of present-day trial proceedings and play-texts. Methodologically, we have also addressed the issue of spelling variation in our early data.

Our study will contribute to our knowledge of the 'spoken' language of the past, the much recognized locus of most linguistic change. It will also illuminate the present through the past and offer a starting-point for further work in the field of variationist study and historical pragmatics.

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