Canting terms in the Early English Prose Fiction Corpus

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Abstract

The paper discusses the use of the Early English Prose Corpus, to identify canting terms and expressions, and verify their meanings in comparison with those given them in contemporary lexicographic works. The analysis finds canting terms and expressions in at least a dozen of the contemporary narrative works included in the Early English Prose Corpus. The meanings found in novels and pamphlets coincide with the definitions of 17th and 18th century dictionaries and glossaries. Quotations found during these searches also provide antedatings of a few terms in earlier sources than those commonly attested, and a few previously unrecorded expressions.

1. Introduction

This paper describes a project designed to find out whether the most frequent canting terms and expressions identified in 17th and 18th century dictionaries and glossaries are present in contemporary narrative works, so as to assess the actual use of these words in the literary compositions of the period and thus increase their degree of reliability. By canting we mean the particular jargon spoken by thieves and vagabonds, identified as an ‘antilanguage’ typical of an ‘antisociety’, since its speakers’ activities were considered criminal for the rest of British society (cf. Gotti 1999).

The Early English Prose Corpus used in this research is a database containing 211 complete works in English prose, from the period 1500 to 1700, by writers from the British Isles; the database is stored on a CD-ROM published by Chadwyck-Healey Ltd. For the purposes of this paper, Richard Head has been selected as a paradigmatic figure to represent 18th century canting lexicographers, as his works are included in the corpus.

2. Richard Head’s contribution to canting lexicography

In his publications, Richard Head dealt with the main types of criminal figures then characterizing the English underworld, their illicit activities and their secret language. The interest in this topic was not new, as several books and dictionaries dealing with the language and the habits of the underworld had appeared for over a century. However, the Civil War and the subsequent Puritan rule had caused a halt in the production of such publications, and only after the end of the Commonwealth had an interest in rogues and their habits arisen again, testified to by the appearance of many pamphlets and books dealing with the description of the tricks of the various types of underworld criminals and of the different kinds of punishment meted out to them. The influence of this new interest in the underworld on the development of a specific sector of the English literature of that time is pointed out effectively by Rawlings:
During the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, crime provided one of the principal subjects for popular literature. All aspects were covered: the crime itself, the investigation, the trial, the punishment and the life of the offender. The works ranged from newspaper articles through broadsheets and pamphlets to large books, sometimes in several volumes. (Rawlings 1992: 1)

In this revival of the interest in the roguish sector of English society, Richard Head played an important role through two very popular works: *The English Rogue* and *The Canting Academy*. In these publications, Head not only provided a thorough description of the habits of this social class, but also reported the most popular words used in communicating within that context. His justification for this linguistic side of his work was that at this time there was ‘little [...] extant in Print of [this] way of speaking, commonly known by the name of Canting. [...] and yet you know how much it is in use among some persons, I mean, the more debauched and looser sort of people’ (Head 1673: To the Reader).

It is particularly in the later of the two books that we find a more accurate treatment of the linguistic aspects of the canting world, testified to not only by the inclusion of a specific dictionary, but also of several remarks and comments on the features of this jargon. A first remark concerns the identification of the main users of this language, who are thus outlined:

There is no profest Rogue whatever, (if he be qualified for his thieving faculty) but must be well vers’d in Canting: and to the intent that they may not fall short of being excellent proficient in all manner of Roguery, they lay the ground work thereof in Canting, for by this they are able to converse with, and understand those of the upper Form of Villany, and by constant frequenting their company, become acquainted with Canting words which are most new, and what are thrown aside as too commonly known, the use whereof if not timely left off, may be the Instruments which may unhappily betray them to their condign punishments. (Head 1673: 2)

Once he has specified the users of this language, Head points out its main characteristics; the first of these is identified in its secret nature, the reason for which is explained by the author:

I shall endeavour to give you an exact account of these Caterpillars, with their hidden and mysterious way of speaking, which they make use of to blind the eyes of those they have cheated or robb’d, and inform one another with what they have done, or designe to do. (Head 1673: 2)

The secret nature of this language is clearly perceived by its users and is strengthened by the oath that each new member of the underworld is made to take during the ceremony in which he is officially admitted into that society; the wording of this oath is reported by Head:

I will not teach any one to Cant, nor will I disclose ought of our mysteries to them, although they flaug me to the death. (Head 1673: 4)