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Modality and freedom of the press: A corpus based study of modality in Early Modern English journalistic writing and its relation to changing press freedom

According to historians of journalism, early newspapers were fairly anodyne publications. It was rare for writers to express an opinion about the news they reported, for fear of governmental reprisals. This paper reports on a project that investigates modality in Early Modern English news reportage, the results of which suggest a link between modality and changes in freedom of expression in print journalism.

In order to investigate the use of modality in journalistic writing we built and analysed a corpus of Early Modern English news, using texts from 1620 to 1720. Our corpus consists of around 500,000 words of press reportage which we obtained from the Burney Collection, which contains over 1270 newsbooks, newspapers, pamphlets and other news texts from 1600 - 1800. The corpus was constructed manually, transcribing the facsimiles of news publications available from the collection into machine readable files. The resulting corpus was marked-up for modality both formally and functionally. The formal mark-up was predominantly automated and captured modal auxiliary verbs, modal lexical verbs, modal adjectives and modal adverbs. The functional mark-up required manual analysis for which we used the model proposed by Simpson (1993). This model divides modality into three types: deontic, which expresses obligation and commitment; boulomaic, which expresses desire; and epistemic, which expresses knowledge and belief.

Using the mark-up, we ascertained the frequencies of different modal forms and functions, and their distribution across the corpus. We also carried out log-likelihood testing to determine the statistical significance of differences in modal frequencies across the time period represented by the corpus. We then attempted to correlate significant fluctuations in modality with wider socio-political events.

In our talk we will describe the construction of our corpus, the issues in annotating it, and the issues in applying a modern functional modality model to an older form of English. We will also present the results of our analysis. Our project attempts to relate changes in journalistic writing to changes in press freedom, and we will report a correlation between some of our figures and changes in legislation relating to printing and journalism. We will also show that the two-pronged form/function analysis enabled us to describe in more detail changes in modality in journalistic writing 1620-1720.

References

Simpson, Paul (1993) *Language, Ideology, and Point of View* London: Routledge