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Investigating diachronic grammatical variation in Early Modern German Evidence from the GerManC corpus

Abstract

The aim of the GerManC project is to compile a corpus of German texts for the early modern period (1650-1800). It is intended to be representative and to this end it will consist of 2000 word extracts from nine text-types, with an equal number of each from five major regions and from three sub-periods of fifty years (1650-1700; 1700-1750; 1750-1800), giving about a million words. In addition, analytical tools are being developed concurrently to tag and lemmatise the corpus with a view to annotating it more fully by the end of the project.

One objective of the corpus is to document the process of standardisation in German, and the texts which have been digitised already provide interesting data in this respect. In particular, they demonstrate clearly the development of grammatical variation and in many cases its gradual elimination during this period, for example

1. Norms changing in line with prestige models:

In non-literary texts, the ending *-e* is initially the most frequent in the weak adjective in the nominative and accusative plural, e.g. *die starke Könige*. However, by the third sub-period the ending *-en* has become dominant, e.g. *die starken Könige*, and differences in usage between text-types indicate that this reflects the more general adoption of a prestige variant from literary texts.

2. Elimination of variation:

In the early part of this period there is still variation in the relative position of the auxiliary verbs and main verb infinitives in subordination, but by the end of the period this variation is almost unknown.

3. Reduction in regional variants:

In the first sub-period regional – especially southern – variants are widely retained, for example gender forms of the numeral *zwei* or inflections in the singular of weak feminine nouns (e.g. *auf der Gassen*). By the third sub-period these are no longer encountered.