La Sapienza

Revisione esterna tesi dott. REMO APPOLLONI (36 ciclo)

APPOLLONI REMO

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

The standardisation of suffixes and definitions in noun taxonomies: a preliminary corpus-based and data-based analysis of the early modern English microlanguage of economics (1572-1664)

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Report

Review of doctoral dissertation "The standardization of suffixes and definitions in noun taxonomies: a preliminary corpus-based and data-based analysis of the early modern English microlanguage of economics (1572-1664)" by Remo Appolloni supervised by Prof. Donatella Montini, Prof. Rafal Boryslawski and Prof. Chiara Prosperi Porta

1. Summary and evaluation of the research project

The dissertation "The standardization of suffixes and definitions in noun taxonomies: a preliminary corpus-based and data-based analysis of the early modern English microlanguage of economics (1572-1664)" is an in-depth largely quantitative study of variation in early modern English texts that discuss issues of political economy. The work is data-driven, with a sophisticated use of software to identify patterns in suffixation and to trace the evolving definitions of key terms, which are compared across early modern subperiods and analyzed in terms of genre and stylistic variables. The dissertation consists of three chapters of varied length (162 pages altogether), with 21 figures or tables visualizing results, and with an 18-page-long bibliography of sources, both academic and historical in nature.

Overall, the thesis is an interesting and multidimensional analysis of historical economic discourse, or microlanguage of economics, as it is termed in the work. It draws its conclusions on the basis of the treatises and publications that constitute a well-rounded dataset of texts by prominent pamphleteers representing various positions in the ongoing scholarly debates about early modern Britain's economic prospects and challenges, especially monetarism vs. mercantilism. The use of the calibrated corpus-based analyses to uncover patterning and nuances in terminological uses in historical texts is an original endeavor that fills a gap in the studies on evolution and variation of academic varieties of English. Methodologically, the study offers a useful recipe for the increased systematicity and replicability of linguistic analysis. The choices behind conducting this type of corpus-driven linguistic inquiry with VARD2, #LancsBox and CPQWeb, together with a spectrum of statistical measures and validation and training methods seem appropriate and well justified. Below, I focus on the structure of the argument, the analytic framework, the presentation of

results and the quality of interpretations, recommending only minor improvements that could increase the readability and flow of the argument.

2. Recommendations

Regarding the dissertation's preliminaries, the abstract (as well as the introduction) is an integral part of the thesis (no longer a research proposal), so the future tense used there could well be replaced with the present simple tense. The research questions make use of the term "microlanguage," which could have been explained better in the introduction. This term may take the readers by surprise, as the introduction clarifies the rationale behind the study with such terms as "specialized discourses" or "economic discourse." Also a note on the subdomain of economics that is delimited as "political economy" and its subdivisions and representatives for the studied period could help the reader understand the relevance of the research undertaking better. A general description of corpus/dataset would be welcome as well as the basic tools (#LancsBox, VARD2, CQPweb). It makes less sense to introduce them only at the end of Chapter Two, as they have been referred to many times earlier. A figure/flowchart illustrating the main stages of empirical part of the research could be a welcome visual enhancement of the introduction.

Also a list of abbreviations used in the dissertation could help readers who would only browse or scan the chapters to help them better follow the references in the argumentation.

The feature that may confuse the reader of the dissertation, and particularly its Chapter One, is the notation that involves both in-brackets references and footnotes for sources. The situation where a term is first introduced with its source referenced in a footnote and then elaborated on with a commentary referencing the same source(s) in brackets is relatively reader-unfriendly. It is not explained if the terms were coined by the referenced authors, or just mentioned in their work. Also, the overuse of the passive voice in literature review obscures the nature of some processes or makes information less precise (e.g., p. 9-10: "These seminal changes affected the object of investigation, which required new methods for empirical observation... the economic system was described in abstract categories and measured in figures. ... This epistemic innovation was mostly influenced by Bacon... Polysemy was not tolerated.... Coinages and redefinitions were increasingly necessary").

Across Chapter One, the role of Latin is mentioned a few times, sometimes to indicate its fading away for the sake of the vernacular, sometimes to indicate its persistence. Having everything about Latin organized in one section would make subchapter 1.2 easier to read. Subchapter 1.3 (and onwards) could also read better after incorporating some details that are now relegated to the footnotes into the main text, especially when the footnotes feature important definitions and examples, as well as sources. Again, why are some references in the text and others in the footnotes (e.g., p. 24 features Plag 2018, 52 as a footnote and as an in-brackets reference in the next line)?

The concise overview of economic issues of the time is a challenge to the reader with many nuances and aspects that had to be mentioned. In my opinion, this burden would be lessened if the material were sequenced chronologically to represent the period studied from 1570s onwards, rather than starting with the 1620s crisis and its repercussions until the end of the 17th century. In addition, there is information in the first paragraph of 1.3.2. on the moral implications of money debasement that should have preceded the information in section 1.3.1 in terms of both chronology and argument. It is not clear why Magnusson's distinction between langue and parole seems to be introduced twice (p. 16 and then p. 17). In fact, much of p. 17 and the top of p. 18 are about the change in economics between medieval usury and mercantile economic system and not the ramifications of economic discourse. A good way to summarize the terminological distinctions for the reader could involve drafting a table/infographic that distinguishes "microlanguage" from discourse, langue, and maybe also register.

Sections 1.4.2 and 1.4.3. are crucial to the understanding of the research problem and questions. They also explain the dominant processes of suffixation and definition-making (through hyponymy, articles, and nominalizations). A few more examples of the concrete words/phrases likely to be found in political economy that exemplify these codification changes would allow to better preview the ways the study is conducted. While the summaries that are added to major parts of the chapter are lucid and coherent, a few more sentences could be added to guide the reader to see how exactly the things that have just been done inform the further steps in the dissertation.

Chapter Two is a clear and comprehensive overview of how the corpus has been compiled and processed and how specific tools and operations have been applied. The description is exhaustive and allows following step by step how the study was designed and executed. Validation and calibration have been explained very competently. Section 2.4 gives basic information about #LancsBox, VARD2, CQPweb, even though their uses have been mentioned earlier in much more detail. As I suggest above, perhaps this basic information is more useful in the introduction somewhere between RQs and thesis structure.

Sections 2.3.1. and 2.3.2. on the pamphleteers whose works are included in the corpus resonate in style and content with 1.3. on Early Modern Britain Economics. This largely biographical and philosophical information about arguments in the economic debates departs from the chapter's focus on specifics of data collection and processing. Had these sections been more about the type of language used in terms of variety, style, etc. I would see their usefulness in Chapter Two, however, I suggest that in the future publication of this thesis as a monograph the Author consider an alternative order, for example, Chapter One: current 1.1.-1.3. and 2.3.1-2.3.2 (explaining the choice of positions and chronologies for the sampling), and Chapter Two: current 1.4-1.5 and 2.1-2.3 (finishing with a short summary revisiting the sampling criteria). As pointed out above, the interim summaries seem to mainly repeat what was done. It would be important to also verbalize why it was done and answer the latent "so what?" questions.

Chapter Three, with the results, analysis, interpretation and discussion of the patterns identified in the corpus is a major contribution to the mapping of economic debates of the early modern period. It offers specific information on generic developments in scholarly economic writing and the functionalities that underpin them (e.g., scholarly/argumentative vs. informational/disseminative). This has been explored in tandem with various parameters of text density and the ratio of Latin or Latinate lexicon. The discoveries presented in subchapter 3.1, made with various types of statistical analysis, show that the trends towards the reduction of variation are not smooth and predictable and can hinge on editorial, generic or even ideological factors. The intervention (automatic and manual) to regularize the spelling and prepare the corpus for an analysis of nouns presented in 3.2 can be seen as a useful methodological protocol for other studies that seek to establish keyness of terms in a diverse and variable dataset. The results presented in subchapters 3.3 and 3.4 allow us to see the productivity of suffixes and trace the growth, evolution and stabilization of the economic lexicon of English, based on the understanding of processes of derivation and borrowing. The analysis and explanation of terminological and definitional changes provided is appropriately contextualized within the previously outlined economic changes that sparked the debates. The linkages between specific language choices, their patterning and the strategic uses of definiteness allows the Author to demonstrate the discursive, rather than just linguistic, characteristics of these economic scholarly debates. Meanwhile, the observations based on specific and aggregated examples allow the reader to see the ongoing systematization regarding taxonomies and ways of referencing the economic concepts.

The dissertation ends with a neat and informative concluding section, where the research questions are concisely addressed and implications for future research are explained.

3. Closing comments

Despite the minor issues of compositional and explicatory nature regarding the two first chapters, I am ready to offer a very positive evaluation of this thesis. I believe it meets the criteria required in the international contexts of doctoral qualifications according to the European Qualification Framework — level 8, in the humanities and social sciences. The Author demonstrates his innovativeness, scholarly autonomy and professional integrity, and a sustained commitment to the development of new knowledge through independent, methodologically reflective and scrupulous research. With an understanding that corrections can be introduced to any future published version of this dissertation or its fragments (if planned), I hereby endorse this dissertation and propose to admit it to the next stages of doctoral proceedings.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

[ ] None　　[ ] Poor　　[ ] Average　　[X] Good　　[ ] Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

[ ] None　　[ ] Poor　　[ ] Average　　[ ] Good　　[X] Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

[ ] None　　[ ] Poor　　[ ] Average　　[X] Good　　[ ] Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

[ ] None　　[ ] Poor　　[ ] Average　　[ ] Good　　[X] Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

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A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

[ ] None　　[ ] Poor　　[ ] Average　　[ ] Good　　[X] Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

[ ] None   [ ] Poor   [ ] Average   [ ] Good   [X] Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

[ ] None   [ ] Poor   [ ] Average   [ ] Good   [X] Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

[X] Yes   [ ] No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

1) adequate as is

2) require minor revision

3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

[X] Accept as is   [ ] Minor revision   [ ] Major revision

Date: 12/4/2024
Reviewer: Molek-Kozakowska Katarzyna