

# “he used most disgusting language”: Speech Descriptors and the Social and Pragmatic Evaluation of Speech in the Old Bailey Corpus

Peter J. Grund, University of Kansas  
[pjgrund@ku.edu](mailto:pjgrund@ku.edu)

The Proceedings from the Old Bailey, the central criminal court in London, have been argued to represent “as near as we can get to the spoken word of the [Late Modern English] period” (<https://fedora.clarin-d.uni-saarland.de/oldbailey/index.html>), and several studies have been devoted to the specific question of the linguistic reliability of the documents as records of the spoken language of the past (e.g., Huber 2007; see also Archer 2014). Assuming the material’s proximity to the spoken language (though with various caveats), other researchers have used the linguistic corpus compiled from a selection of the Proceedings to chart trends as regards a variety of speech-related, sociolinguistic, and interactional features in Early and Late Modern English (e.g., Traugott 2011; Säily 2016; Widlitzki and Huber 2016; Claridge 2020; Claridge, Jonsson, and Kytö 2020). In this paper, I take a different approach to this material: I do not aim to evaluate the reliability of the “spokenness” of the records; nor do I intend to study “spoken” features of the Proceedings per se. Instead, I explore how the speech reporters (whether witnesses, the scribes taking down the records, or others) evaluate, frame, and position the speech that they represent. To do so, I look at “speech descriptors,” which modify or comment on the represented speech, such as “exultingly” in “It was said exultingly” (1821; OBC t18210411\_64) or “most disgusting” in “he used most disgusting language” (1846; OBC t18460706\_1443) (see Grund 2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Such descriptors have the potential to give us access to a range of broader as well as more localized attitudes toward and negotiations of the represented speech and, by extension, attitudes toward the identity and characteristics of the original speaker. I chart the sociolinguistic and pragmatic meanings of speech descriptors in the Old Bailey Corpus, showing the ways in which metatextual features can enhance our understanding of perceptions and evaluations of speech and speakers in the Late Modern English period.

## References

- Archer, Dawn. 2014. Historical pragmatics: Evidence from the Old Bailey. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 112(2): 259–277.
- Claridge, Claudia. 2020. Epistemic adverbs in the *Old Bailey Corpus*. In Ewa Jonsson and Tove Larsson (eds.), *Voices Past and Present – Studies in Involved, Speech-Related and Spoken Texts*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 133–151.
- Claridge, Claudia, Ewa Jonsson, and Merja Kytö. 2020. *Entirely innocent*: A historical sociopragmatic analysis of maximizers in the *Old Bailey Corpus*. *English Language and Linguistics* 24(4): 855–874.
- Grund, Peter J. 2017. Description, evaluation and stance: Exploring the forms and functions of speech descriptors in Early Modern English. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 16(1): 41–73.
- Grund, Peter J. 2018. Beyond speech representation: Describing and evaluating speech in Early Modern English prose fiction. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 19(2): 265–285.

- Grund, Peter J. 2020a. What it means to describe speech: Pragmatic variation and change in speech descriptors in Late Modern English. In Merja Kytö and Erik Smitterberg (eds.), *Late Modern English: Novel Encounters*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 295–314.
- Grund, Peter J. 2020b. The metalinguistic description of speech and fictional language: Exploring speech reporting verbs and speech descriptors in Late Modern English. In Grund, Peter J. and Terry Walker (eds.), *Speech Representation in the History of English: Topics and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 102–130.
- Huber, Magnus. 2007. *The Old Bailey Proceedings, 1674–1834*. Evaluating and annotating a corpus of 18th- and 19th-century spoken English. In Anneli Meurman-Solin and Arja Nurmi (eds.), *Annotating Variation and Change*. Helsinki: VARIENG. Available online at <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/series/volumes/01/huber/>
- Säily, Tanja. 2016. Sociolinguistic variation in morphological productivity in eighteenth-century English. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 12(1): 129–151.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2011. Constructing the audiences of the Old Bailey Trials 1674–1834. In Päivi Pahta and Andreas H. Jucker (eds.), *Communicating Early English Manuscripts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 69–80.
- Widlitzki, Bianca, and Magnus Huber. 2016. Taboo language and swearing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English: A diachronic study based on the *Old Bailey Corpus*. In María José López-Couso, Belén Méndez-Naya, Paloma Núñez-Pertejo, and Ignacio M. Palacios-Martínez (eds.), *Corpus Linguistics on the Move: Exploring and Understanding English through Corpora*. Amsterdam: Brill. 313–336.