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Digital Hansard: Politics and the Uncivil

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Summary

This short paper uses the recently-completed Hansard Corpus to show the patterning of attitudes expressed by the British Parliament about things considered to be ‘uncivilized’ across the last two centuries. It starts from the lexical resource of the Historical Thesaurus of English to gain an overview of the lexicalisation of the concept ‘uncivilized’ and uses this digital data to demonstrate a substantial shift (from foreign to domestic) in who Parliament considers to be uncivil.

Introduction

The ways in which the British have discussed ‘uncivilized’ peoples which travellers have encountered throughout the history of English gives a key insight into how people in the past have identified and classified the world around them. This paper uses data from the Hansard Corpus 1803-2003 (Alexander and Davies, 2015-) alongside the Historical Thesaurus of English (Kay et al, 2015-) to analyse the evolution of how the English-speaking people have thought of those who they think uncivil in five different sense-families — as animals, as ill-formed people, as strange-speaking outsiders, as savages, and finally as innocents awaiting enlightenment. Only these large digital data sources can show us the patterning of who and what the British Parliament have considered to be barbarous across time.

Data

This analysis became possible following the completion of the Historical Thesaurus of English (HT) in 2009 and the semantically-tagged Hansard Corpus 1803-2005 in 2015, both of which are currently directed by Alexander and were created by teams of scholars at the University of Glasgow.

The HT is a database of all the recorded words in the history of English arranged according to their meaning; one of the world’s oldest digital humanities projects, and in progress for over 50 years, the HT database (stored on media from punch cards to tape to diskettes to networked storage to the Web) allows us an unparalleled resource for analysing the history of English. The Hansard Corpus 1803-2005, completed in 2015, is a digital corpus of speeches in the British Parliament between those dates, consisting of 1.6bn words across 7.6m speeches. Its contents were semantically tagged in the 2014-15 SAMUELS project (The SAMUELS Consortium, 2015) with disambiguated meaning codes from the HT, making it possible to search for semantic categories rather than words, as we do below.

The Uncivil

The category of Civilization in the HT gives us an indication of a non-typical pattern in the number of words available to describe a given concept (in English, categories normally grow throughout time) in the words referring to uncivilized and a lack of civilization, as Figure 1 shows.

While the size of the uncivilized adjective category rises in the latter 20th century, there is a substantial fall at the same time in the size of the lack of civilization noun category, which we argue is connected to the shift in who has been considered to be uncivil (see below). In addition, of the 42 words in the uncivilized category in the HT (see Figure 2), the vast majority follow a particular path of lexicalization which we describe below, with new terms reflecting the shifting conceptualization of the uncivil throughout the times at which they were coined.
Thus far this sort of analysis has been slow-paced and difficult to undertake. However, with the tagging in the *Hansard Corpus 1803-2005* we can investigate this sort of semantic and conceptual change in a much more rapid fashion by honing in on uses of these meanings in context across time.

**Parliament**

There are five families of meaning into which the words above can be categorised, as outlined above. In a past article (Alexander and Struan, 2013), we assembled some evidence for this from the history of English in a non-systematic fashion. For this short paper, we instead account for all the evidence from the *Hansard Corpus* — over 2,000 uses of the semantic category — in order to trace across recorded Parliamentary history the shifts in the cultural, political and social attitudes towards the ‘uncivilized’. This shows a substantial change in the picture which differs from the simpler five-family view of the sense evolution of *uncivil* we described in that earlier article.

Our first change to discuss is the shift, shown below, from the uncivil primarily being foreigners in the 1800s to being domestic persons in the 1900s onwards.

This is reflected in the changing discourse surrounding *barbaric* and *uncivil* things, where a majority of 20th century uses refer to barbaric practices and actions rather than persons:

Through four other graphs, we further report on the distribution of uncivil references across the globe and between the two Houses of Parliament. We also show the changes in the five evolutionary sense-families we outline above, which is key to the foreign/domestic shift we describe.

Some quotes from the corpus can briefly illustrate these changes, which here are aimed at a general body of persons, or a country:
Mr Charles Adderley, House of Commons 21 February 1865: ‘...to discharge what Lord Grey described as the singular office of dispensing rude laws among uncivilized tribes.’

Earl of Carnarvon, House of Lords 12 May 1874, on India: ‘But a central government is not enough. In barbarous times and in uncivilized countries, roads are the first condition of improvement; and here it will be our first duty to open and secure the maintenance of roads and trade-paths.’

Mr Richard Cherry (Attorney-General for Ireland), House of Commons 20 March 1908: 'I never said that the people of Ireland were West African savages.'

Lord Hylton, House of Lords 18 April 1995: ‘We can now see that in dealing with Russia we are dealing with a semi-barbarous state and a society that only knew a measure of democracy for a few years before the First World War.’

Mr Andrew Robathan, House of Commons 1 November 2001, on the pending invasion of Iraq: ‘We should not allow a barbaric, mediaeval [sic] regime to succeed or last. We certainly do not want to go back to civil war.’

As a result, we can show empirically the shift over two centuries in the ways which Members of Parliament described uncivil or barbaric entities, from foreign people or places to domestic practices. We conclude by arguing that this is the result of increased oppositionality being shown in the digital Parliamentary record, and so in this short paper we combine ‘big picture’ graphs of large-scale data analysis with more focused examples from the corpus record.

Bibliography


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