"Of Bought Wit":
Plagiarism, Imitation and Borrowing in Early Modern England

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Paper proposal

The pragmatics of citation in a digital corpus of early modern English prose writing

Angela Andreani

Abstract

Citations in contemporary writing perform a variety of functions: they supply verifiable links to sources, they help define the theoretical framework on which a specific text is grounded, and they can help outline a writer's field or niche. Furthermore, they can provide justification for arguments, they can work as tools for supporting claims, and they can be a strategy to emphasise the relevance of specific points in a text. Yet the practice of citation has undergone changes through the centuries, so that current definitions may not adequately reflect their forms and functions in early modern textuality.

Building on Ken Hyland's model of citation in academic discourse and within the framework of historical pragmatics, this paper will analyse examples of citations in a corpus of early modern texts to describe their language, forms and to detect their discursive pragmatic functions. The analysis is carried out on a digital corpus of factual prose writing (historiography, treatises and science) using a digital corpus manager and text analysis software (SketchEngine).

This paper aims to bring out how early modern English writers would encode their relationship with sources through language: what forms of citation did they use? Could different practices of citation reflect different ideas about originality and authorship? Can we work out a pragmatics of citations to reveal something about the intellectual processes of reference, appropriation, imitation and borrowing, among others?

Selected references

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Sketch Engine https://www.sketchengine.eu/