

MAURIZIO GOTTI

## *Canting terms in early English prose\**

L'articolo prende in considerazione la metodologia adottata e i risultati ottenuti nell'analisi dell'*Early English Prose Corpus*, al fine di verificare l'effettiva presenza nelle opere di carattere narrativo del 17° e 18° secolo di espressioni gergali comunemente riportate nei dizionari e glossari dedicati a tale varietà linguistica. Un altro scopo dell'articolo è quello di verificare i significati comunemente attribuiti a tali espressioni e confrontarli a quelli a loro attribuiti nelle opere lessicografiche di quel periodo. Lo scopo dell'analisi è inoltre quello di identificare i termini gergali presenti nel corpus e non menzionati precedentemente nelle opere lessicografiche su questo argomento.

The paper takes into consideration the methodology adopted and results obtained in the analysis of the Early English Prose Corpus, in order to trace the presence of canting terms and expressions. By *canting* we mean the particular jargon spoken by thieves and vagabonds, identified as an 'antilanguage' typical of an 'antisociety', since its speakers' activities were considered criminal for the rest of British society (cf. Gotti 1999). This paper derives from a project aiming to find out whether the most frequent canting terms and expressions identified in 17th and 18th century dictionaries and glossaries are present in contemporary narrative works, so as to assess the actual use of these words in the literary compositions of the period and thus increase their degree of reliability. Another purpose of the investigation is to verify the meanings commonly attributed to these expressions and to compare them to the ones given them in contemporary lexicographic works. The presence of any terms appearing in canting contexts and not mentioned previously is also an object of the present analysis.

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The corpus examined consists of a database containing 211 complete works in English prose, from the period of 1500 to 1700, by writers from the British Isles; the database is stored on a CD-ROM published by Chadwyck-Healey Ltd. For the purposes of this paper, Richard Head has been selected as a paradigmatic figure to represent this group of 18<sup>th</sup> century canting lexicographers, as his works are included in the corpus taken into consideration.

### 1. *Richard Head's contribution to canting lexicography*

In his publications, Richard Head dealt with the main types of criminal figures then characterizing the English underworld, their illicit activities and their secret language. The interest in this topic was not new, as several books and dictionaries dealing with the language and the habits of the underworld had appeared for over a century. However, the Civil War and the subsequent Puritan rule had caused a halt in the production of such publications, and only after the end of the Commonwealth had an interest in rogues and their habits arisen again, testified to by the appearance of many pamphlets and books dealing with the description of the tricks of the various types of underworld criminals and of the different kinds of punishment meted out to them. The influence of this new interest in the underworld on the development of a specific sector of the English literature of that time is pointed out effectively by Rawlings:

During the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century crime provided one of the principal subjects for popular literature. All aspects were covered: the crime itself, the investigation, the trial, the punishment and the life of the offender. The works ranged from newspaper articles through broadsheets and pamphlets to large books, sometimes in several volumes. (Rawlings 1992: 1)

In this revival of the interest in the roguish sector of English society Richard Head played an important role through two very popular works: *The English Rogue* and *The Canting Academy*. In these publications, Head not only provided a thorough description of the habits of this social class, but also reported the most popular words used in communication

taking place in that context. His justification for this linguistic side of his work was that at his time there was ‘little [...] extant in Print of [this] way of speaking, commonly known by the name of Canting. [...] and yet you know how much it is in use among some persons, I mean, the more debauched and looser sort of people’ (Head 1673: To the Reader).

It is particularly in the later of the two books that we find a more accurate treatment of the linguistic aspects of the canting world, testified to not only by the inclusion of a specific dictionary, but also of several remarks and comments on the features of this jargon. A first remark concerns the identification of the main users of this language, who are thus outlined:

There is no profest Rogue whatever, (if he be qualified for his thieving faculty) but must be well vers’d in Canting: and to the intent that they may not fall short of being excellent proficientes in all manner of Roguery, they lay the ground work thereof in Canting, for by this they are able to converse with, and understand those of the upper Form of Villany, and by constant frequenting their company, become acquainted with Canting words which are most new, and what are thrown aside as too commonly known, the use whereof if not timely left off, may be the Instruments which may unhappily betray them to their condign punishments. (Head 1673: 2)

Once he has specified the users of this language, Head points out its main characteristics; the first of these is identified in its secret nature, the reason for which is thus explained by the author:

I shall endeavour to give you an exact account of these Caterpillars, with their hidden and mysterious way of speaking, which they make use of to blind the eyes of those they have cheated or robb’d, and inform one another with what they have done, or designe to do. (Head 1673: 2)

The secret nature of this language is clearly perceived by its users and is strengthened by the oath that each new member of the underworld is made to take during the ceremony in which he is officially admitted into that society; the wording of this oath is thus reported by Head:

I will not teach any one to Cant, nor will I disclose ought of our mysteries to them, although they flaug me to the death. (Head 1673: 4)

Another aspect of this roguish cant pointed out by Head is its high degree of changeability, the reason being thus explained in *The Canting Academy*:

From these [the Rogues] I understood, that the Mode of Canting alter'd very often, and that they were forced to change frequently those material words which chiefly discovered their mysterious practices and Villanies, least growing too common their own words should betray them. (Head 1673: 56-57)

In order to emphasize the linguistic aspect of his work, Richard Head groups the terms most commonly used by the members of the underworld in a specific dictionary, divided into two sections: 'Canting before the English' and 'English before the Canting' (the equivalent of a bilingual dictionary's sections). The importance of Head's contribution is highlighted by the fact that in these sections he does not only report the canting terms listed in previous publications, but he also adds many new ones, so as to make his dictionary 'more compleat than any hath been publisht hitherto' (Head 1673: To the Reader). As several of the terms included in his dictionary will be totally unknown to his readers, Head is aware of the need to emphasize the reliability of his data and thus reassures his readers:

I can assure you (the helps being so inconsiderable) the pains I took in the Collection of new Words is unimaginable. (Head 1673: To the Reader)

Moreover, in order to strengthen the reliability of his new terms, Head clearly states that all of them 'have passed the approbation of the Critical Canter' (Head 1673: 57). Indeed, in his collection of material for his new books, Head has not been at all reluctant to contact even rogues and other speakers of cant, and to include them – together with previous canting publications – among his sources for new data, as he himself clearly states in his work:

I have consulted likewise what is printed on this subject, and have slighted no help I could gather from thence, which indeed is very little; the greatest assistance I had in this discovery, was from Newgate; which with much difficulty I screw'd out of the sullen Rogues, who would not speak a word till I had suppled their tongues with the oil of Barley, or

rather thaw'd their obstinate silence with the heat of strong Liquors.  
(Head 1673: 56)

This great care in collecting data and the differentiation in his use of sources make Head's contribution to the analysis of the canting language very interesting. His innovative canting expressions will constitute the main object of our analysis, which will be based on the text of *The English Rogue*, one of the works included in the Early English Prose Corpus.

## 2. *Head's new canting terms*

The new canting terms occurring in *The English Rogue* have been grouped in the appendix; apart from three, all these terms are listed in the 'Canting Vocabulary' included in Chapter 5 of the first part of this text. The entries reported in this dictionary amount to 187, which is a relatively high number if compared to the total of five hundred expressions included in all the different books on cant published between 1535 and 1612. Among the cant expressions that Head provides, 37 are new or have a meaning which is different from the one(s) reported in previous publications, thus demonstrating that his contribution is extremely relevant, at least in quantitative terms. Of these new expressions the great majority consists of nouns (31 out of 37); the rest is made up of adjectives (4) and verbs (2); all the new terms correspond to content words, while grammar terms remain the same as those of the general language. This aspect is a typical linguistic feature of both cant and slang, as several studies on the subject have pointed out; cf. Halliday:

The principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those that are central to the activities of the subculture and that set it off most sharply from the established society. (Halliday 1978: 165)

As regards the semantic fields to which Head's new canting terms belong, they correspond to the lexical areas typical of the various specialized activities of the underworld and of the reality in which their practitioners live. The highest number consists of expressions used to indicate people, and in particular the members of this social class: *Dommerar* = A

Madman, *Mumpers* = Gentile Beggars [i.e. genteel beggars, who will not accept victuals, but money or clothes], *Quier-Cove* = A Rogue, *Quier-Mort* = A Pocky Jade [i.e. a woman or harlot that is syphilitic]. Other terms refer to their aspect, character or condition (*Canke* = Dumb, *Damber* = Rascal, *Dimber* = Pretty) or to the different representatives of the more general society with whom rogues are in contact (*Culle* = A Sap-headed Fellow, *Cully* = A Fool or Fop, *Rome-Culle* = A Rich Coxcomb [i.e. a rich fool, simpleton or dupe], *Kinchin Cove* = A little man). A few expressions have been coined to denote parts of the body or diseases (*Cannakin* = The Plague, *Prating cheat* = A Tongue, *Quarron* = A Body). Other lexemes instead refer to clothes and personal objects (*Calle* = A Cloak, *Duds* = Goods, *Lurries* = All manner of cloaths, *Mish* = A Shirt).

A number of expressions refer to crime and fraud, particularly as regards theft and cheating: *Betty* = An Instrument to break a door, *Budge* = One that steals Cloaks, *Bulk and File* = The Pickpocket and his mate, *Gilt* = A Pick-lock, *Kidnapper* = A fellow that walketh the streets, and takes all advantages to pick up the younger sort of people, whom with lies and many fair promises he inticeth on board a ship and transports them into forreign plantations, *Nab* = To take, or cheat, *Rome-Padders* = High-way men, *Shop-lift* = One that steals out of shops. Strictly connected with these are the terms referring to trial, punishment or imprisonment: *Fib* = To beat, *Naskin* = A Gaol or Bridewell, *Trine* = Tyburn [i.e. the place of execution for Middlesex to 1783].

Several terms refer to actions commonly carried out by members of the underworld (*Dup* = To enter) or to different aspects of their daily lives (*Fogus* = Tobacco or Smoke, *Frummagem* = Choakt, *Jague* = A Ditch, *Pad* = The High-way, *Tick-rome* = A License). Two expressions are instead linked to the semantic area of money and spending: *Deuswins* = Two pence, *Tres wins* = Three pence.

### 3. *The analysis of the corpus*

The words listed in the appendix have been investigated throughout the Early English Prose Corpus to find any occurrences in other texts than Head's. Of the 37 terms, 25 (two thirds of the canting expressions

analysed) appear only in *The English Rogue*. The others, instead, appear also in other texts, although not always with a canting connotation (these are identified by an asterisk in the appendix). The seven which have a canting value only in Head's texts are the following:

- *Betty*, which is used as a proper noun in the other texts.
- *Budge*, which appears in other books with the semantic value of 'fur (garment)' or with a verbal function.
- *Calle*, which is used as a graphic variant of the verb *call* or as a noun having the semantic values of 'street' or 'driving' (place where cattle are driven).
- *Gilt*, usually connected with gold covering or to a young prostitute.
- *Mish*, appearing in the expression *mish-mashes* (meaning 'confused mixtures').
- *Nab*: apart from its other canting value of 'head' found in *The English Rogue*, this word occurs in other texts within the expressions *hab-nab* (used as an adjective with the meaning 'random') and *hab nab* (having the adverbial value of 'anyhow').
- *Trine*, appearing in another text in the noun phrase *God Trine*.

The remaining five terms have instead been found with a canting connotation also in other texts, published either before or after inclusion in *The English Rogue*. In the latter case the occurrence in a later text may be the result of the influence of Head's canting dictionary or a confirmation of its reliability; in the former case – besides providing further evidence for the real existence of these expressions – the texts identified may also be hypothesised as possible sources of Head's neologisms. The canting expressions found in texts published after *The English Rogue* are the following:

- *Bulk and File*: This expression has been found twice in Keach (1684) with the same meaning as Head's.
- *Cully*: This word appears in many texts such as Anonymous (1683a, 1683b, 1683c, 1684), Behn (1685, 1687), Brown (1700), Gildon (1692) and Kirkman (1673a). The 33 occurrences<sup>1</sup> of this term in these texts testify to its popularity in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and its use not only in canting contexts but also in the

<sup>1</sup> Apart from these 33 occurrences, twelve more concerning the plural form *cullies* have been found in five texts, all of which already mentioned in connection with the singular form.

standard language – although in colloquial environments and concerning topics connected to the lives of criminals – with its wider double meaning of ‘dupe’ and ‘mate’.

- *Mumpers*, used by Keach (1684) in the following list of canting terms: ‘and learn’d the Canting Names, used by the whole Corporation of Thieves and Beggars; as Mumpers, Milkins, Pads, and Room-Padders, Clapperdungeons, Bulk and File, &tc<sup>2</sup> (Keach 1684: 84).
- *Kidnapper*: This too is a word that became standardised in the period following the publication of *The English Rogue*; indeed, in our analysis of the corpus we found it included in a quotation drawn from Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1684).
- *Pad*, inserted in the expression *Squires of the Pad* (meaning Highway-men) in the context of the following lively description of roguish people:

The persons that meet are generally Men of an Infamous Character, and are in various Shapes, Habits, and Employments. Sometimes they are Squires of the Pad and now and then borrow a little Money upon the King’s High-Way, to recruit their Losses at the Gaming-House, and when a Hue and Cry is out, to apprehend them, they are safe in one of these Houses, as a Thief in a Mill, and practise the old Trade of Cross-biting Cullies, assisting the Frail square Dye with high and low Fullums, and other Napping Tricks, in comparison of whom the common Bulkers, and Pick-Pockets, are a very honest Society. (Brown 1700: 106-107)

One of these canting terms has also been found in a text published before *The English Rogue*, and may therefore have acted as a source for Head’s dictionary. This term is *Bulk*, which appears twice in Anonymous (1662); it is interesting to notice that in these two quotations – reported below – the author provides a clear context from which the semantic value of this term (i.e., a pickpocket’s accomplice) is made evident:

They have several Forms or sorts of Pick-pockets, they have one fellow always in company when they go about this Employment, whom they call a Bulk, that is, to make some quarrel in the streets, or else obstruct the passage while the Whipsters do the Feat; (Anonymous 1662: 50)

<sup>2</sup> All of these terms are included in Head’s canting dictionary, albeit sometimes with a different spelling.



There was one Bat Rud as He was since informed, who was the Bulk; who observing the man held his Hand in the Pocket where his Gold was, just in the middle of the Lane whitherto they dogged him, overthrew a Barrel trimming at an Alehouse door, while one behind the Grasier pusht him over, who withall throws down Bat who was ready for the fall; betwixt these two, in the ground arose a quarrel, the Pick-pocket demanding satisfaction, while his Comrades interposing (after two or three blowes) in favour of the Countrey-man (who had drawn his hands out of his Fob to defend himself) soon drew out his Treasure; and while he was looking, on the scuffle, some of them had lent him a hand too and Fingered out his Watch. (Anonymous 1662: 77-78)

It is interesting to notice that these occurrences have so far been ignored, as they do not appear as first quotations of the canting term *bulk* in the main diachronic dictionaries of the English language (such as *The Oxford English Dictionary*) or of the language of the underworld (such as Partridge 1949/1961), which commonly quote Head as the innovator.

#### 4. *The search for orthographic variants*

As spelling conventions in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were not very consistent, the existence of several orthographic variants for the same word was a common phenomenon. Starting from this assumption, a search for the presence of Head's new terms in the Early English Prose Corpus was carried out using the orthographic variants suggested in Partridge (1949/1961). This search, however, gave limited results, as only the following five variants were found:

- *Canniken*, only found in Head with the same meaning as *Cannakin*.
- *Culley*, found in Anonymous (1683c) with the same semantic values as *Cully* (cf. above).
- *Kinchin Co*, used by Head himself in his Second Part (1668) as a variant for *Kinchin Cove*.
- *Room-Padders*, found in Keach (1684) with the same canting meaning as Head's *Rome-padders*.
- *Shop-lifter*, which occurs both in Head (1671b) and Kirkman (1673b) with the same meaning as *Shop-lift*.

In order to find more orthographic variants of Head's neologisms, the searching options of the Early English Prose Corpus were used, and in

particular those seeking variant spellings. Of these, however, the searching option based on a \* wildcard (representing any number of characters including none, e.g. *wander\**) often proved to be too time-consuming and frequently gave an excessively high number of hits; this was the case, for example, when searching for the following words, which resulted in over 50 hits: *d\*mer\**, *du\*d\**, *can\*k\**, *cul\**. Better results were instead obtained when specifying as many known characters as possible, with a minimum of three. The results integrated those previously obtained; the following were cases of confirmation of Head's spellings:

- *De\*wins* > *Deuswins*.
- *D?mb?r\** > *Dimber*, *Damber*.
- *Fru\*mage\** > *Frummagem*.
- *Nask\** > *Naskin*.
- *Nas\*k?n* > *Naskin*.
- *Qu?er\*mort\** > *Quier-mort*.
- *R?m\*-Pad\*er\** > *Rome-padders*.

## 5. *The unexpected results*

The reading of some of the quotations found during the searches above provided the stimulus for further analyses. Indeed, the canting context in which some of Head's new terms were found contained other words and expressions which were worthy of investigation. This was the case of the following quotation taken from Head's text, in which *Mouths* is provided as a synonym for *Cullies* (in the sense of 'dupes'):

... the tricks on Cards, by which they usually cheated their Cullies or Mouths, ... (Head 1665: 320)

... the tricks on Cards by which they were wont to cheat their Cullies or Mouths; (Head 1665: 428)

Interestingly, Partridge (1949/1961) reports the first occurrence of this word used in canting contexts with the semantic value of 'a gullible person, a dupe (esp. if an easy one)' in John Poulter's *Discoveries* (1753); *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following quotation, which is also taken from a later work than Head's:

6. *slang*. A silly person; a dupe; **1680** COTTON *Compl. Gamester* (ed. 2) 7 The whole Gang will be ever and anon watching an opportunity to make a Mouth of you.

Another source for interesting observations has proved to be Anonymous (1662). In analysing the quotation containing the term *Bulk*, we came across the word *Rub*; as can be seen in the continuation of the quotation reported above, this is reported as a term used by pick-pockets:

And then there is another ready whom they call the Rub, into whose Hands the prey is conveyed, and he clearly carries it away. (Anonymous 1662: 50)

In Partridge (1949/1961) this term is not even reported; only the verb *to rub* is mentioned with the meaning ‘to run away’, first occurring in a quotation dated 1688; similarly, this noun – used in a canting sense – is omitted also in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Another expression reported neither in Partridge (1949/1961) nor in the *OED* is *File-clyers*, given as a synonym of the canting noun *diver* (meaning ‘pickpocket’) as can be seen from the following quotation:

I had but very little choice, so I listed my self of another Colony or Plantation (but who neither sow nor reap) of the Divers or File-clyers. (Anonymous 1662: 48)

Words with this meaning but different spellings are indeed reported in those two dictionaries, but all appearing in quotations dated later than 1662: Partridge (1949/1961) mentions the spellings *file(-)cloy*, *file-cly*, *foil-cloy* and *foyl-cloy* with B.E. (1698) as the earliest occurrence; *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates Head (1673) as the first source for the term *Foyl-cloy*.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis carried out has proved that canting terms and expressions were not limited to 17th and 18th century dictionaries and glossaries, as they were also present in at least a dozen of the contemporary narrative works included in the Early English Prose Corpus. Also the

meanings with which they were explained in lexicographic works coincided with those found in novels and pamphlets.

As regards the particular reliability of Richard Head's reporting of innovative canting terms, the corpus analysed has provided a very limited confirmation, as only five of his 37 new expressions have been found in other texts. These terms generally occur with a canting connotation in works published after they were included in *The English Rogue*, and may therefore be the result of the influence of Head's canting dictionary; indeed, some of them became quite popular in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and were in use not only in canting contexts but also in the standard language, although generally in colloquial environments and concerning topics connected to the lives of criminals. One of these canting terms has also been found in a text published before *The English Rogue*, and may therefore have acted as a source for Head's dictionary.

Making use of the searching options offered by the CD-ROM adopted, a few orthographic variants of Head's neologisms have also been investigated. Although it has given limited results (as only five variants were identified), this search for variant spellings has proved particularly useful as an analytical practice, as different strategies have been tried out and varying results have been obtained.

The corpus examined has not proved to be particularly useful for this analysis, as only a minority of the terms investigated appear in it; thus the CD-ROM used – although being a wide database comprising 211 complete works in English prose – only represents a slice of the Early Modern English of the period, as it is biased towards the standard and the literary.

The reading of some of the quotations found during these searches has also pointed to the occurrence of a few terms in earlier sources than those commonly attested, as well as the presence of a few expressions appearing in canting contexts and not previously mentioned. Many of these innovative forms have been found in Anonymous (1662), which has proved to be a very stimulating source of interesting observations.

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## Appendix

This appendix lists the terms in *The English Rogue* which are either new or have a new meaning. The words marked with an asterisk appear in the Early English Prose Corpus in the context of other works besides Head's.

BETTY*	KIDNAPPER <sup>4</sup> *
BUDGE*	KINCHIN COVE
BULK AND FILE*	LURRIES
CALLE*	MISH*
CANNAKIN	MUMPERS*
CANKE	NAB*
CULLE	NASKIN <sup>5</sup>
CULLY <sup>3</sup> *	PAD*
DAMBER	PRATING CHEAT
DEUSWINS	QUARRON
DIMBER	QUIER-COVE
DOMMERAR	QUIER-MORT
DUDS	ROME-CULLE
DUP	ROME-PADDERS
FIB	SHOP-LIFT
FOGUS	TICK-ROME
FRUMMAGEM	TRES WINS
GILT*	TRINE <sup>6</sup> *
JAGUE	

<sup>3</sup> This word appears in the Part 3 of *The English Rogue*.

<sup>4</sup> This term does not appear in the canting vocabulary but elsewhere in the text of the first part of *The English Rogue*.

<sup>5</sup> This word appears in Part 4 of *The English Rogue*.

<sup>6</sup> This term already existed as 'to hang'; Head added the meaning 'Tyburn' to it.