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A diachronic study of the prepositions *among* and *amongst*[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the usage of the prepositions *among* and *amongst* in the history of English. The main objective is to assess whether there is variation between the two forms in previous stages of the language and, if such is the case, to investigate its causes and provide an explanation for it. On the basis of the results, it may be possible to chart any factor(s) influencing the choice of one or the other in Present-Day English, for which several possibilities have been put forward: British vs. American English (Quirk et al. 1985: 666), written vs. oral language, and phonological context (Fowler 1926 [2009]: 19). The study draws on a range of corpora, both diachronic (*Helsinki Corpus* and *ARCHER*) and synchronic (*BNC* and *COCA*).

1. Introduction

The question about the difference between *among* and *amongst* has been addressed in dictionaries and grammars of English as well as reference books and handbooks or manuals about English language usage. According to the *OED*, *amongst*, which is recorded only as a preposition- *among* appears as a preposition and as an adverb- is "less usual in the primary local sense than *among*, and, when so used, generally implying dispersion, intermixture, or shifting position". In this respect, Fowler (1926 [2009]: 18-19) argues

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that "[s]uch a distinction may be accepted on authority, but can hardly be made convincing by quotations even on the liberal scale of the OED" and maintains that the survival of both forms without clear-cut distinction may be explained by "the unconscious desire for euphony or ease", *amongst* being more common before vowels[2]. Apart from the difference regarding part of speech, the senses listed in the *OED* for both words as prepositions are similar.

The *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1994: 90) reports that *amongst* is less common than *among* (as Fowler 1926 [2009] does), but that both words are correct. It is also pointed out that *amongst* is slightly more frequent in British than in American English. According to this dictionary, "[t]he few commentators who call *amongst* quaint or overrefined are off target", and modern examples are provided to support this idea: "…in divided usage amongst adults"; "…alcohol use and drinking problems amongst women". In the online version of the dictionary[3], when looking up *amongst*, the user is directed to the entry *among*, in which *amongst* is only referred to as a variant of *among*; no usage or explanatory notes about the choice between the words are provided. Not much more is discussed in Quirk et al.'s reference grammar, which notes the difference in usage between American and British English (1985: 680), highlighting that *amongst* occurs especially in British English (1985: 666).

Todd – Hancock (2005: 44) argue that there is no semantic difference between the terms, and that the choice to use one or the other depends on regional and, possibly, age factors. These authors indicate that *amongst* is employed in northern and eastern parts of the United Kingdom, and that young speakers consider it archaic and/or literary. According to them, *amongst* is commonly used in prayers (e.g. "Blessed art thou amongst women") and *among* in all other contexts. They go on to suggest that it is probable that *amongst* will gradually disappear.

With regard to specific studies, Bech (2006) has analysed the variation in Present-Day English by assessing different corpora, finding that *among* is generally the most frequent form, although *amongst* is more common in spoken language. She concludes that *amongst* "seems to be used more by

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[2]   However, in his notes to the 2009 edition of Fowler's *Dictionary*, David Crystal dismisses the idea that the distinction may be based on phonetic grounds, and suggests reasons of "personal taste" and "regional background" to account for the choice of one or the other form (Fowler 1926 [2009]: 747).

[3]   http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amongst (accessed 8 August 2012).

speakers who hesitate and need time to think before they speak, and/or mon[it]or their language more carefully" and that the two forms are not entirely interchangeable in terms of meaning (Bech 2006: 42).

In the light of all this and given that the variation between *among* and *amongst* remains virtually unexplored from a diachronic point of view, the usage of the words throughout the history of English will be analysed in this article in order to examine the variation within the different periods of the language (i.e. Old, Middle, Early Modern, Modern and Present-Day English) and to assess whether there are any factors explaining that variation. The study draws on a range of corpora, both diachronic and synchronic. The diachronic corpora employed are *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (Rissanen et al. 1991) and *ARCHER: A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (2006); the synchronic ones are the *British National Corpus* (*BNC*) and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (*COCA*) (Davies 2012).

2. Methodology

Etymologically, *among* comes from the Old English phrase *on gemonge*, from *on + gemonge*, the latter being the dative of *gemong* 'crowd', which comes in turn from *ge-* (associative prefix) + *-mong* (from Old English *mengan* 'to mix'). Before the 12th century, the phrase was shortened to *onmang* and by normal phonetic gradation to *amang*, *among*. The form *gemang* was employed without *on* as well, later evolving into *ymong* and *mong*. The word *amongst* comes from Middle English *amonges*, from *among* + the adverbial genitive *-es*, which in the 16th century was corrupted to *-st* due to form-association with superlatives (cf. *agains*(*t* and *amids*(*t*) (*OED* and *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary online*).

According to the *MED*, *among* can have different spelling variants in Middle English, the main ones being *among* and *amonges* (precursor of *amongst* as mentioned above), but they also include the following: *amonk*(*e*, *amonx*, *amongist*, *amang*(*es*; *emong*, *emang*(*es*, *emaung*, *emung*; *imong*, *imang*(*es*; *omang*(*es*; *en mang*, *in mong*(*e*, *in mange*, *on mang*; *mang*(*is*, *mong* (and *amang*, *amonkes*, *emang*, *emaung*, *imong*, *omang* as adverbs). No reference is made to any possible distinct meaning of the different spellings.

The earlier stages of the language (Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English) were examined by searching *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (*HC*). The *HC* contains 450 texts from 730 to 1710, covering the Old, Middle and Early Modern English periods, which are in turn divided

into subperiods. The total word count amounts to 1,572,820: 413,250 for the Old English section; 608,570 for Middle English; and 551,000 for Early Modern English (Kytö 1996). Searches were done separately for each period, which has made it possible to assess the evolution of the terms. The later evolution was investigated with corpora of Modern and Present--Day English: *ARCHER: A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (2006), the *British National Corpus* (*BNC*), and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (*COCA*)[4]. *ARCHER* consists of approximately one thousand texts from the years 1650 to 1999, comprising 1,789,309 words[5]. It includes both British (1,253,557 words) and American (535,752 words) English, thus allowing comparison between subcorpora. The *BNC* is a 100 million word corpus comprising the decades 1980s-1993; the *COCA* contains 464,020,256 words (at the latest update for 2012) from 1990-2012.

Wild-card searches were employed so as to obtain all the possible spelling variants; these included the search elements "*m*ng*", "*m*nk*" and "*m*nx*". One of the main difficulties was the overgeneration of forms. As Curzan and Palmer (2006: 22) state, one of the major handicaps when large and untagged databases are searched is basically the retrieval of far more data than originally contemplated. This has been the case since some of the corpora analysed share these two characteristics, i.e. large and untagged. For the Old English part of the *HC* alone, for example, 984 tokens were retrieved after the searches, 1,100 from the Middle English part and 1,527 from the Early Modern English part. Many of the instances, such as Old English *mildsunge*, *middangeard* or *semninga*, were not relevant and, therefore, the data had to be manually classified and some of them rejected. The same methodology has been followed for all the corpora examined. In order to statistically validate the results for significance, the normalised frequency (to a text of 10,000 words) of the occurrences of the forms of *among* and *amongst* has been calculated.

Frequency of occurrence, the phonological context following the prepositions, variables of written and spoken language, as well as semantic considerations have been examined and will be discussed in the following section.

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[4] In order to retrieve all the instances of *among* and *amongst* in the different corpora, the files were loaded into *AntConc* (Anthony 2011), a freeware concordance programme.

[5] The version consulted has been *ARCHER* 3.1. A corrected and expanded version, known as *ARCHER* 3.2, has recently become available (in December 2013) (see http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/lel/research/projects/archer/).

3. Analysis of corpora

Once the data from the Old English period were sorted, a total of 33 occurrences of AMONG[6] were obtained (*onmang* [7×]; *on gemang* [5×]; *in gemonge* [3×]; *on gemonge* [3×]; *amang* [2×]; *gemang* [2×]; *ingemong* [2×]; *ongemang* [2×]; *on gemong* [2×]; *ongemong* [2×]; *gemong* [1×]; *gimonge* [1×]; *gimongo* [1×]). No early form of AMONGST is evident in those data. The number of occurrences has been normalised for the sake of comparison, thus representing 0.79 occurrences of AMONG for every 10,000 words. Henceforth several examples of the data analysed will be provided after the quantification of the results for each period and corpus[7]:

(1)   "…winn betwux þam Casere of Sexlande & his sunu. & **onmang** þam gewinnan se fæder forðferde". (COCHROE4.txt) […conflicts between the Emperor of Saxony and his son and in the midst of them fought and the father died.]

(2)   "**Onmang** þam þe se cyng þone castel besæt. com se eorl…" (COCHROE4.txt) [While the king besieged the castle, came the earl…]

With respect to Middle English (encompassing the years 1150 to 1500 in the corpus), 217 occurrences of AMONG were found (*among* [101×]; *amonge* [34×]; *omang* [20×]; *amang* [13×]; *imong* [8×]; *mang* [7×]; *emonge* [6×]; *a-mong* [5×]; *emong* [5×]; *a-monge* [4×]; *a-mang* [2×]; *amange* [2×]; *emang* [1×]; *emange* [1×]; *enmang* [1×]; *i-mang* [1×]; *i-mong* [1×]; *in-mange* [1×]; *mong* [1×]; *monge* [1×]; *o-mang* [1×]; *ymange* [1×]. The searches also returned the word BIMONG (*bimong* [6×]; *bi-mong* [1×]), which occurs as a preposition and which is recorded in the *OED* as a form parallel to *among* and *ymong*, but is now obsolete. This occurrence in Middle English is not attested either in Old English or Early Modern English in the corpora examined.

(3)   "and, syþ licnesse is cause of loue **among** men, sych diuision is cause of hate and enuye". (CMWYCSER.txt) [and, since similarity is cause of love among men, such division is cause of hate and envy.]

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6   Due to the different spelling variants, reference to *among* and *amongst* is made from now on in terms of prototypes and indicated by means of small capitals.

7   The reference of each example within the corpus is provided in brackets after the example.

(4) "In scho come, and none hir bad, **Omang** riche metes and gestes glad". (CMNORHOM.txt) [In she came, and none asked her, among rich meats and glad guests.]

As for AMONGST, 44 occurrences were retrieved (*amonges* [30×]; *amanges* [3×]; *omanges* [3×]; *ymangs* [2×]; *amenges* [1×]; *amongis* [1×]; *amongs* [1×]; *amongus* [1×]; *anmongeyst* [1×]; *emonges* [1×]).

(5) "For as moche as rumour and spekyngge is **amonges** some men of the Citee that vitaillers foreins…" (CMDOCU3.txt) [For as much as rumour and speaking is amongst some men of the City that foreign traders…]

(6) "Druuyd is of woednes myn eghe: i. eldyd **ymangs** all myn enmys". (CMROLLPS.txt) [Dried are my eyes from grief; feebled amongst all my enemies.]

Tokens for AMONG amount to 3.56 and those for AMONGST to 0.72.

Data from the Early Modern English period of the *HC*, which covers the period from 1500 to 1710, were also collected in order to trace the development of the words' usage. For this period, the sum of tokens for AMONG was 168 (*among* [115×], *amonge* [47×], *emong* [3×], *a mong* [2×], *omonge* [1×]) and, for AMONGST, 118 (*amongst* [101×], *amongest* [6×], *amonges* [3×], *emongest* [3×], *amongs* [2×], *emongeste* [2×], *amongesth* [1×]). These render 3.04 and 2.14 occurrences per 10,000 words respectively.

(7) "After this were there certaine questions **among** his councell proponed, whether the king needed in…" (CEBIO1.txt)

(8) "…examples of semblable beneuolence we can finde **amonge** the gentiles, in whom was no vertue inspired, but…" (CEEDUC1A.txt)

(9) "If a man with gorgeous apparell come **amongst** vs, although he bee a theefe or a murtherer…" (CESERM2A.txt)

(10) "And being a boy, new Bacheler of arte, I chanced **amonges** my companions to speake against the Pope: which…" (CEEDUC1B.txt)

The second corpus consulted, corresponding to the Modern English period, was *ARCHER*. The distribution of AMONG and AMONGST across this corpus,

after the searches and classification of data, was 353 occurrences of AMONG (*among* [353×]) and 98 of AMONGST (*amongst* [98×]) retrieved from the British English subcorpus. This equals 2.81 and 0.78 per 10,000 words respectively.

(11)   "Quite a razzia has been made **among** the London weekly papers by the police of Paris." (1858peo2.n6b)

(12)   "There will be intense discontent **among** Arab peasants over it." (1936dugd.j7b)

(13)   "Pieces of charcoal, which is the worst **amongst** the more perfect conductors, were connected by…" (1825davy.s5b)

(14)   "…and part of Sir Jeremy's fleet turned up **amongst** our ships." (1666alli.j2b)

From the American English subcorpus, 183 occurrences of AMONG (*among* [183×]) and 21 of AMONGST (*amongst* [21×]) were obtained, equalling 3.41 and 0.39 in normalised figures per 10,000 words each.

(15)   "I wish there was more of it to be seen **among** all orders and professions, but…" (1775aadm.x4a)

(16)   "Averse to magnificence and ostentation I live **among** them without ceremony, and shall not flatter…" (1787mark.f4a)

(17)   "She was, at the time of his arrival **amongst** them, a lively girl of ten years old, wild as the…" (1798rows.f4a)

(18)   "The powers of darkness be let loose **amongst** us, and they that be against them must be up." (1893wilk.d6a)

Finally, searches were conducted for Present-Day English by resorting to two synchronic corpora, the *BNC* and the *COCA*. For British English, the *BNC* was checked[8]. The number of tokens obtained was 22,153 for AMONG and 4,401 for AMONGST, which, translated into normalised figures, amount to 2.21 and 0.44 respectively.

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8   Data were retrieved from http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/ (accessed 20 August 2012).

(19)   "But a very different response appeared **among** some bien pensant intellectuals". (AHG W_newsp_brdsht_nat_arts)

(20)   "Nor did he find much useful support **among** artists, in part because he began his tenure with the blessing…" (CRA W_pop_lore)

(21)   "At home many keen gardeners **amongst** the clergy subscribed, for example, the Dean of Rochester and…" (ALU W_misc)

(22)   "Demand for advice is strongest **amongst** actual victims of computer misuse, where it is effectively…" (CBX W_commerce)

For Present-Day American English, the *COCA* was examined[9]: 159,457 tokens were retrieved for AMONG and 2,664 tokens for AMONGST, yielding 3.43 and 0.05 respectively in normalised figures.

(23)   "Newly discovered principles show the similarities **among** networks of all kinds, from the Internet to Al Qaeda". (2002 NEWS CSMonitor)

(24)   "In the business world, and **among** energy services professionals, a more familiar indicator of…" (2001 ACAD EnergyJournal)

(25)   "There will be good journalism and bad journalism **amongst** that, but it does democratize the process and I think that…" (2004 SPOK CNN_Intl)

(26)   "I maintain that it is precisely an influence of Christianity, **amongst** other ways of thinking associated with colonial and…" (2007 ACAD AfricanArts)

When comparing the results provided by the different corpora (Fig. 1), a significant difference is found in the usage of the two words in the history of English: *among* is the most frequently employed word in all the periods. However, during Early Modern English the usage of *amongst* increases considerably. This period records the largest number of instances of all for *amongst* and the disparity in terms of occurrence between *among* and *amongst*

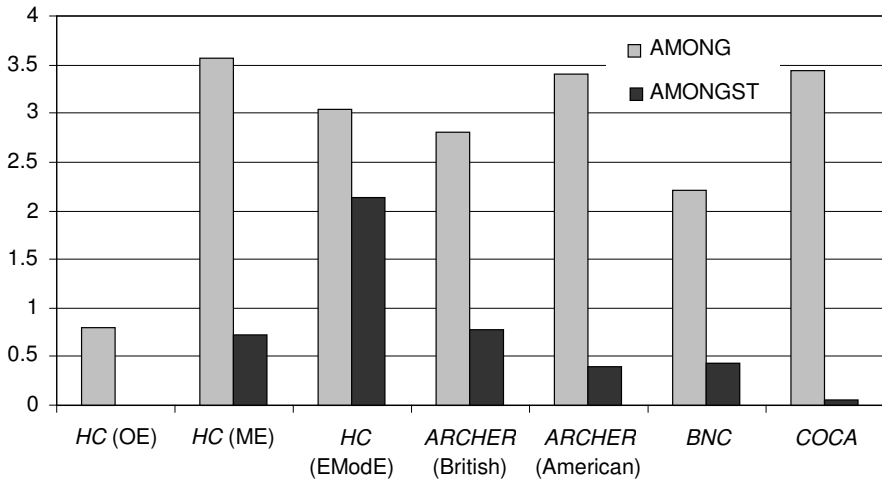9   Data were retrieved from http://corpus2.byu.edu/coca/ (accessed 20 August 2012).

Figure 1. Development of usage of *among* and *amongst* in the corpora analysed

is not as great as in the other corpora. After Early Modern English, there is a sharp drop in the quantity of occurrences. Another important difference has to do with the variety of English in which the words are used: the American part of *ARCHER* together with *COCA* include the smallest number of occurrences of *amongst-* with a decreasing use of the word as well.

3.1 Phonological context

Insights into the variation between *among* and *amongst* may be gained by taking into consideration phonological contextual factors (see Introduction). The type of sound that follows the preposition, whether vocalic or consonantal, may have an influence on the occurrence of one or the other due to articulatory reasons (i.e. ease of articulation). In other words, the endings (a velar nasal in the case of *among* and an alveolar fricative[10] plus a dental stop in the case of *amongst*) may favour a certain context.

Since the variation starts in Middle English (no antecedent of *amongst* is attested in Old English), this will be the starting point for the examination of phonological context. Forms functioning as adverbs and cases of preposition stranding have not been considered (examples 27 and 28).

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10   Only a dental stop in Middle English.

(27)   "Bot if God help **amang**, I may sit downe daw To ken. Now assay
        will I How". (CMTOWNEL.txt) [Unless God helps, I may sit down as
        a fool. Now I will assay how…] (Middle English)

(28)   "…and of the gloomy things you find yourself **amongst**. Do not be so
        uneasy about the future. Try to…" (1886giss.f6b) (Modern English)

In Middle English, 139 instances of AMONG are followed by a consonant
and 51 by a vowel (2.28 and 0.83 in normalised figures respectively). As for
AMONGST, 29 instances are followed by a consonant and 14 by a vowel (0.47
and 0.23 in normalised frequencies).

     In Early Modern English, AMONG + consonant occurs on 138
occasions and AMONG + vowel, on 29 (2.50 and 0.52 in normalised figures
correspondingly); those occurrences of AMONGST + consonant amount to 85
and those of AMONGST + vowel to 32 (1.54 and 0.58 in normalised figures).

     The results for Modern English are the following: for British English,
304 instances of AMONG + consonant and 47 instances of AMONG + vowel
(2.42 and 0.37 in normalised figures), whereas 75 instances of AMONGST +
consonant and 21 instances of AMONGST + vowel (0.59 and 0.16 in normalised
figures); for American English, 162 instances of AMONG + consonant and
20 instances of AMONG + vowel (3.02 and 0.37 in normalised figures), whereas
15 instances of AMONGST + consonant and 6 instances of AMONGST + vowel
(0.27 and 0.11 in normalised figures).

     Finally, for Present-Day English, due to the large number of instances,
a sample of 100 occurrences and their corresponding contexts have been
analysed for each of the words in both corpora. In the case of the British
corpus (*BNC*), the occurrences of AMONG + consonant are 83 and of AMONG
+ vowel, 17; those of AMONGST + consonant amount to 70 and of AMONGST
+ vowel to 30. With regard to American English (*COCA*), 74 instances of
AMONG are followed by a consonant and 26 by a vowel. Where AMONGST is
concerned, 68 instances are followed by a consonant and 32 by a vowel.

     In the light of these results and as the data in Fig. 2 demonstrate,
in Early Modern English *amongst* seems to be preferred over *among* when
a vowel sound follows, a pattern which is neither present nor continued in
the directly previous and subsequent stages (Middle and Modern English
respectively), but which reappears in Present-Day English, as *amongst* occurs
with a frequency slightly higher than that of *among* before a vowel sound
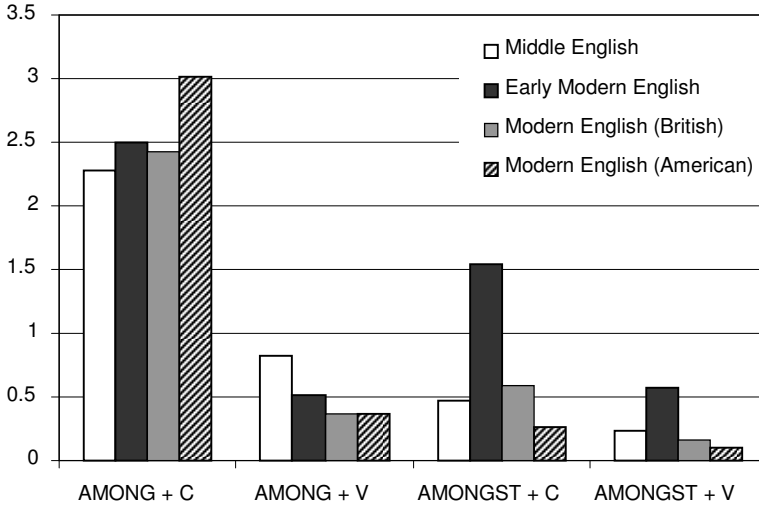both in British and American English (see Fig. 3).

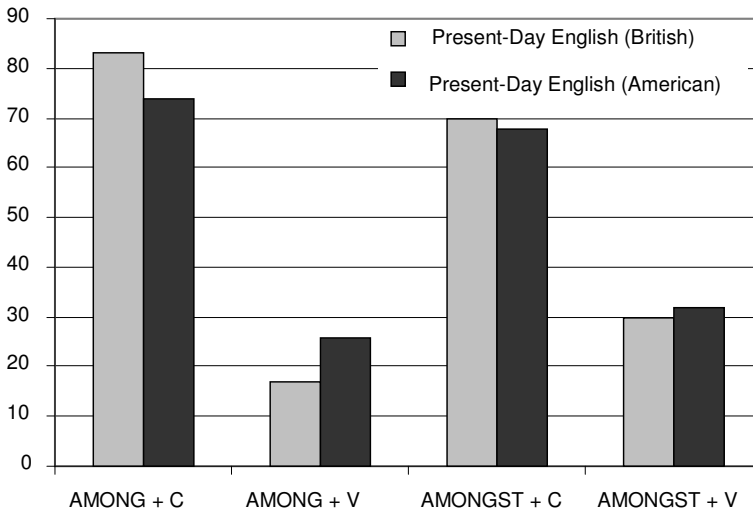Figure 2. Phonological context of *among* and *amongst* (diachronic)

Figure 3. Phonological context of *among* and *amongst* (synchronic)

3.2 Written versus spoken language

The synchronic corpora on which the present study was based have allowed instances of written and oral language to be retrieved separately. In the *BNC*, the number of tokens obtained for AMONG was 22,153, of which 21,884 belong to written language and 269 to spoken language (2.18 and 0.02 in normalised figures respectively). For AMONGST, they amount to 4,401: 4,087 tokens for

written language and 314 tokens for spoken language (0.48 and 0.03 in normalised figures respectively).

In the *COCA*, a total of 159,457 tokens were retrieved for AMONG, of which 144,213 were written and 15,244 spoken (3.10 and 0.32 in normalised figures respectively); for AMONGST the number of tokens was 2,664: written, 1,670; spoken, 994 (0.03 and 0.02 in normalised figures respectively).
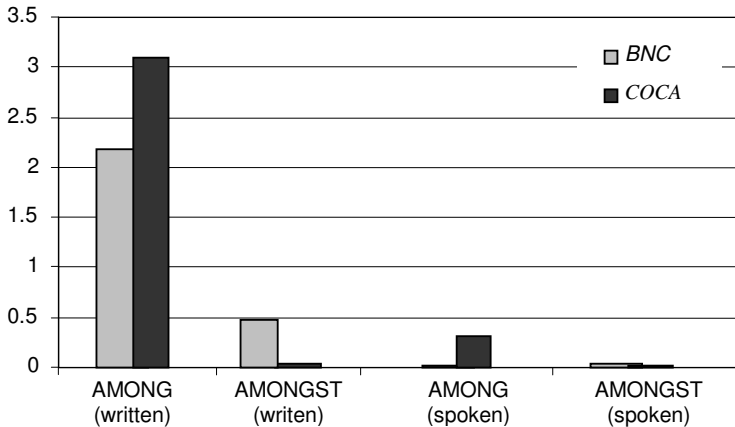

Figure 4. Written vs. spoken language (synchronic)

The data corroborate the supposition that the use of *amongst* is more typical in British than in American English, but also show that in British spoken language *amongst* is more frequent than *among*.

3.3 Semantic difference

There seems to be no consensus on whether *among* and *amongst* are semantically differentiated (see Introduction). After a cursory examination of the data, we can tentatively suggest that there is no evident semantic distinction between the two forms. Both *among* and *amongst* are employed before the same words and appear to be used interchangeably.

(29)   "…all of this season of bad will that has grown up **among us**. Give it back to you". (1989lat2.n8a) (American Modern English)

(30)   "…in the sore throat (which appeared lately **amongst us**) with success; so that I hardly dare venture…" (1769bard.m4a) (American Modern English)

(31) "…but it remained as no more than a fashion **among the rich**. It was a fashion now past". (H84 W_fict_prose) (British Present-Day English)

(32) "…resentment within certain sections of the country, especially **amongst the rich** who would stand to lose a great deal if Mobuto…" (EF1 W_fict_prose) (British Present-Day English)

4. Conclusions

In spite of the number of spelling variants in the earlier stages of the language for the words under study, they were reduced to the two forms currently in use, *among* and *amongst* (of which the former is the most common) in Early Modern English- a period in which standardisation and defining what represented "good" English were key ideas. In this respect, Lass (1999: 8) argues that "[the] growing perception of standardness as a virtue […] is connected with a general late Renaissance and Enlightenment desire for linguistic 'normalisation' and 'stabilisation'". Classical principles heavily influenced stylistic developments in renaissance English writing, which increased the popularity of complex constructions (Rissanen 1999: 189). This idea can help to explain the increased use of *amongst* in this period (in fact the highest for all periods of English), as this word might have been perceived as belonging to a register more sophisticated than that of *among*.

With regard to the variety of English, the results confirm previous discussion on the topic in that the use of *amongst* is more common in British than in American English.

On the basis of the evidence discussed in Section 3, it can be said that *amongst* is preferred over *among* in Present-Day English when a vocalic sound follows. This usage has a parallel in the history of English, namely in Early Modern English, in which the same tendency has been observed. Another finding is the higher occurrence of *amongst* in oral language in Present-Day British English. Further assessment on phonological issues including rhythm and stress patterns of the phrases which contain the prepositions could give more insights into the variation.

Concerning semantic differences (cf. the *OED*'s explanation in the entry for *amongst* stating that, compared to *among*, it usually denotes "dispersion, intermixture, or shifting position"), in view of the data analysed, both words

seem to be interchangeable with no evident distinction in terms of meaning. However, further research is needed to confirm their semantic equivalence.

Although the data show a steady drop in the usage of *amongst* and no clear difference between it and *among*, it cannot be concluded, as suggested in the literature, that *amongst* will disappear and *among* will take over.

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