



The Loss of English Directional Adverbs: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Language as a constantly changing aspect of life experiences different changes that include, inter alia, vocabulary, grammar, sounds. Some of the words that were used in Old English are no longer in use. This paper deals with the loss of a number of directional adverbs that were vitally in use in Old English while disappeared in Present Day English (PDE). A group of seven adverbs were selected to serve as data for this research. Each adverb is examined separately in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), and Oxford English Dictionary (OED) to find their frequency, meaning, and the context of their usage within two centuries. The results showed that there was a prominent decline in the frequency of the given adverbs. Nevertheless, the frequency rates fluctuated through decades to reach an absolute disappearance in Present Day English. Due to the lack of the scholarly work on this issue, the reason behind the loss of these adverbs is remained unclear.

Keywords: Frequency token, Historical Linguistics, COCA, COHA, Adverbs, Context.

1. Introduction

It is obvious that English, in the course of its history, has undergone several changes which cover almost all the aspects of language including phonetics, phonology, syntax and morphology (Joseph & Janda, 2003). English, since in the early Old English periods up to present day, has been receiving enormous numbers of words that enrich its vocabulary, but at the same time, the vocabulary of the English language has seen the loss of many words from various syntactic categories (Sapir, 1921). Some of the words were frequently used in early Old English period until early Modern English, whilst later, several of them were replaced by similarly semantically related words and others died out. The reason for the loss of some of the words is still unclear since there has not been much scholarly research regarding topics such as the group of directional adverbs, namely *hither*, *thither*, *whither*, *whence*, *thence*, *hence* and *whithersoever*.

Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the reasons, if any, behind the loss of a group of directional adverbs, which will serve as the data. These were very frequently used during eighteenth century, although their frequency declined during the same century and some of them almost completely faded out in Present Day English (PDE). However, another purpose of this study is to investigate the frequency of these words and compare their usage reduction from eighteenth century to present.

The data will be analysed through checking the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) for their frequency and examples. On the other hand, in order to check their meanings and the date of first occurrence in recodes, the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED) will be used. The research may need the data to be checked in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to show the contexts in which the adverbs are used



in PDE. In conclusion, in addition to the summary of the results, further topics will be suggested for future research.

2. Literature review

Tallerman (2011) defines adverbs as optional modifiers to verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Adverbs are words that are mostly recognized by *-ly* suffix. Adverbs add significant modifications and details to context of the sentence. In general, there are many classifications of adverbs; for example, there are adverbs of time, direction, manner, place, frequency ... etc. According to Carpo (1970), the function of the directional adverbs is to show the direction of the movement or to indicate the direction of the geographical position. These adverbs have an optional role in the sentence.

Looking at literature, it seems that the loss of these kinds of adverbs has not yet been the focus of historical linguistic research. Perhaps, the only academic work that hints the issue of the erosion of directional adverbs in English morphology is an article by McWhorter (2002) in *Diachronica*. McWhorter (2002) argues that, in old Germanic languages, there were distinct types of directional adverbs in terms of location and moving forward or backward. Moreover, he says that some of the directional adverbs like *hither*, *thither*, and *whither* are very ancient words, and that is the reason why the distinction with the same form is totally absent, unlike *where*, which has a variable distinction to the same form, as shown in the example in his article: "Where is she at? Versus A: We're going now. B: Where to?" However, McWhorter (2002) quotes Sapir (1921: 196-170) about the loss of directional adverbs:

As soon as the derivation runs danger of being felt as a mere nuancing of, a finicky play on, the primary concept it tends to be absorbed...[an] instance of the sacrifice of highly useful forms to this impatience of nuancing is the group *whence*, *whither*, *hence*, *hither*, *thence*, and *thither*. They could not persist in live usage because they impinged too solidly upon the circles of meaning represented by the words *where*, *here* and *there*. That we add to *where* an important nuance of direction irritates rather than satisfies.

Here in this quotation, Sapir (1921) stresses that directional adverbs are firmly imposed upon the meaning spheres that are represented by other words. This probably indicates that the decrease in the usage of *whence*, *whither*, *hence*, *hither*, *thence*, *hence* and *thither* was triggered by the use of other words. Nevertheless, this reason does not account for the imprecise truth behind their loss.

3. Data and Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the data for this study is a group of seven directional adverbs that were very frequent in the Eighteenth century, but later they became infrequent. The adverbs are *hither*, *thither*, *whither*, *whence*, *thence*, *hence*, and *whithersoever*. These words have relatively similar usage as all of them are indicative of a sign, a place or a direction of motion, whereas their meanings and dates of their first occurrence in English are different. Thus, OED is used to briefly enlist their meanings as in Table 1 below:

Table (1) – Meanings of Seven Directional Adverbs

No.	Adverbs	Meaning
1	<i>hither</i>	To move in various directions
2	<i>thither</i>	To or towards that place
3	<i>whither</i>	Where or where to
4	<i>whence</i>	Where from
5	<i>thence</i>	From that place
6	<i>whithersoever</i>	To whatever place
7	<i>hence</i>	Away from here

Besides, the frequency of these adverbs has been reduced sharply in different periods over the past two centuries; therefore, the data will be checked for overall frequency over time one-by-one so that a precise outcome can be concluded for the periods when their frequency dropped. For this purpose, the giant historical English corpus COHA is used. COHA is the biggest organized corpus that permits the user to search for words in historical American English registers. It contains more than four hundred million words from the period of 1810 to 2009 and provides authentic information about the frequency of the words, technical changes in language and semantic changes of words.

The search tools in COHA are quite accessible and variant. Each search can be modified to look up different queries, for instance, it is possible to search for the changes that occurred on the grammar, parts of words or other parts of words that are being used in different ways. Additionally, a search can be generated for only the semantic changes for a particular group of words like verbs or so can be investigated. All queries can be accomplished in distinct periods of time and there is also room for comparisons between periods. Therefore, the search will be modified for this study to show the frequency of each dataset in a timeline chart whereby each bar would represent the frequency percentage per million words within the period of ten years.

On the other hand, in general, the corpus of words in each decade is different since it is common that fewer documents are collected from eighteenth century than present time. In other words, if we search for the token frequency for the adverb A, COHA will show X number of tokens in a year while Y number in another year. Hence, X might be smaller than Y, but the corpus that is used for Y is greater. This indicates that the researchers cannot only rely on the number of tokens, but their token frequency percentage must be taken into consideration as well.

The research may also require to present data from COCA to show in what text types these adverbs are used in PDE. COCA contains 450 million words from different text types such as spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. It is the biggest corpus of contemporary American English. There are plenty of search facilities in this corpus; the search tools provide the search for the frequency of a word in a particular genre of writing.

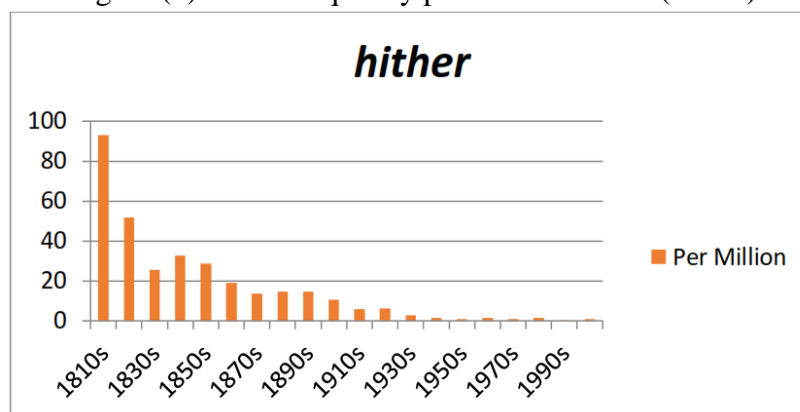
4. Results

Each adverb is examined separately in twenty decades from 1810 to 2009 because their frequencies vary from one decade to another. The results of the seven directional adverbs in COHA are listed below:

A. *hither*

This adverb, according to OED, was first dated in historical records in 1158. After checking the frequency in COHA, 3775 tokens appeared for *hither* which were divided based on different periods from 1810 to 2009. The frequency percentage per million words is shown in the following figure:

Figure (1) – The frequency per million words (*hither*)



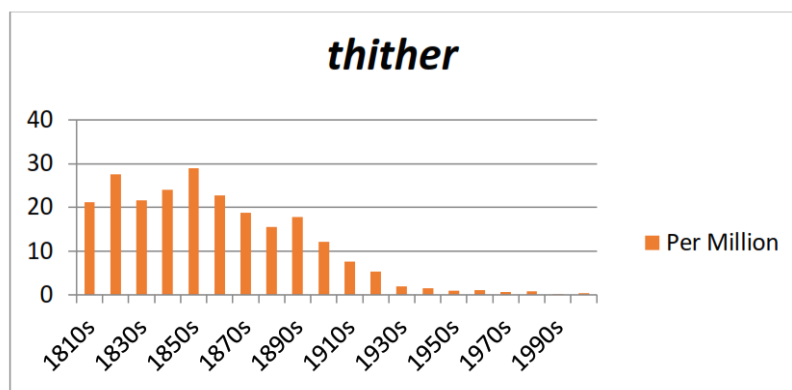


The data in figure 1 illustrates that the frequency per million words of the adverb *hither* peaked at 93.13 in the 1810s when *hither* appeared 110 times in a corpus of more than a million words. In the following decade, the frequency dropped by almost 50% to 51.82% when there are only 359 tokens for *hither* in six million words. The frequency fell in 1830 to 25.41%, whereas from the 1840s to 1940s the frequency of *hither* declined gradually. In the in 1990s, the second half of twentieth century, the frequency reached its lowest until only 9 tokens were found in twenty-eight million words.

B. thither

This adverb seems to be very ancient because it is dated back to a900 when it first appeared as an adverb in OE records. The overall tokens for *thither* are 3550 tokens. The following figure gives details about the frequency per million words:

Figure (2) – The frequency per million words (*thither*)

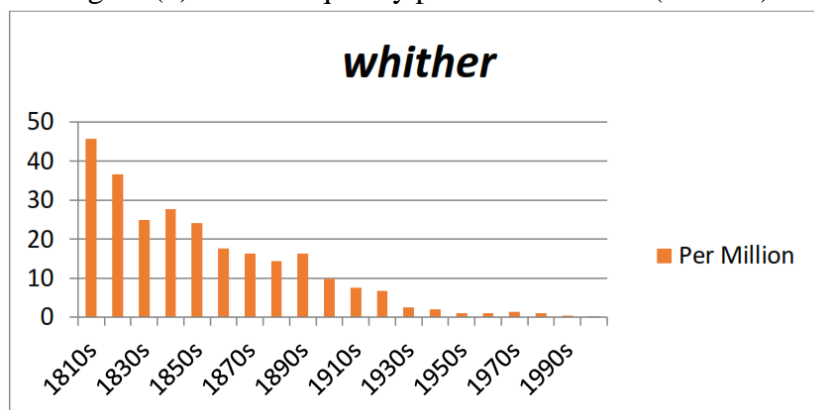


Unlike the previous adverb, the frequency of *thither* fluctuates from the 1810s to 1850s; where it hits the peak at 28.96% in the 1850s when 477 tokens were identified in the corpus of nearly seventeen million words. Due to the lack of the scholarly works, the reason behind this significant increase remains unknown. In later decades, it dropped regularly until the 1920s, although there is a fluctuation from 1870s to 1890s. This adverb became very rare at the beginning of twentieth century and, even in PDE, *thither* becomes quite an infrequent word.

C. whither

Whither first appeared in a version of The Vespasian Psalter in the second half of the eighth century. According to the data in COHA, 3503 tokens are found for *whither* in the duration of two centuries. Its token frequency per million words steeply declines in the second half of nineteenth century as shown in Figure 3 below:

Figure (3) – The frequency per million words (*whither*)



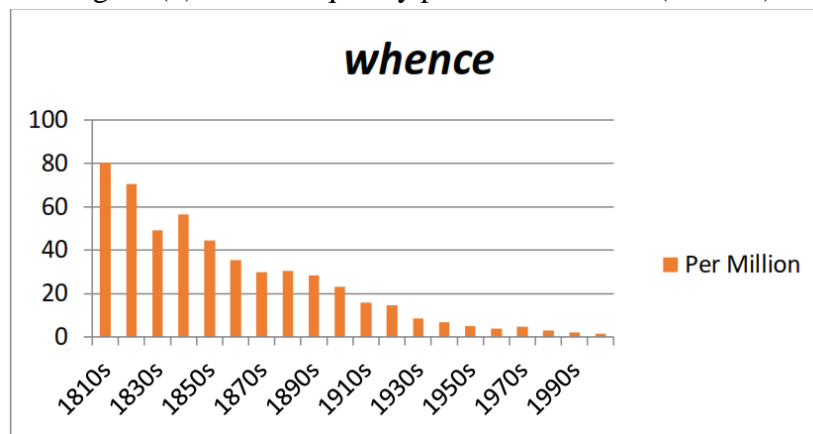


Obviously, the adverb *whither* displays high frequency in the first half of nineteenth century since in 1810s the frequency was 46% or 54 tokens in the smallest corpus in terms of the number of words. There is a sharp decrease in the frequency percentage from the 1820s to 1830s and also from the 1890s and onwards. Moreover, there is a slight fluctuation from 1860s to 1890s. Further, from the 1930s to 2000s where the corpus is vast, very few tokens are found.

D. whence

The very first occurrence of this adverb was in a1300. The frequency search for this adverb in COHA revealed that there were 7351 tokens of this word. The following figure demonstrates the expected decrease in its frequency:

Figure (4) – The frequency per million words (*whence*)

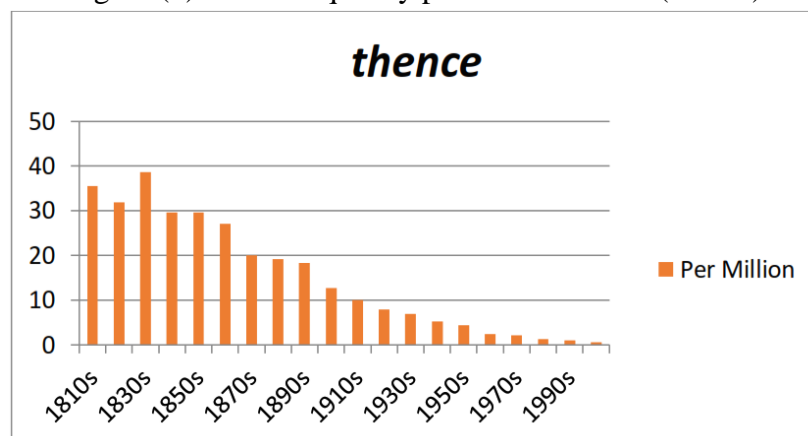


The data indicates dissimilar results in some way because the adverb *whence* has the largest number of tokens, at 7351, thus far. Then again, the highest percentage is in the 1810s as 95 tokens in more than a million words. The frequency reduced to some extent in the 1820s, whilst in the 1840s the percentage is almost half the percentage as in 1810s before it began to steadily drop from the 1850s to 2000s.

E. thence

The first date recorded for this directional adverb was c1290. It is less frequent in the first half of eighteenth century as it has fewer tokens during this period. COHA shows 4666 tokens appearing within two centuries. The following timeline figure shows the frequency per million words of the adverb:

Figure (5) – The frequency per million words (*thence*)



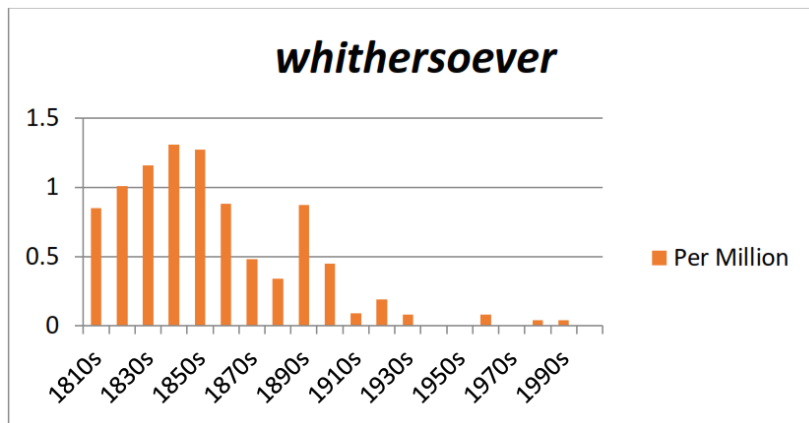


As shown in figure 5, although *thence* reached its peak in the 1830s, it was still not very frequent because in the corpus of nearly fourteen million words, only 533 tokens are found. The percentage dropped in the following decade from 39% to 30%. Later however, the overall percentage declined, from 1850s onward, and in the second half of twentieth century, the general percentage for the frequency of *thence* per million words was under 5 per million words.

F. *whithersoever*

This compound adverb, according to OED, was often used as *whithersoever*, but *whithersoever* first appeared in c1230 in Hali Meidenhad: an alliterative homily. OED records show that this adverb disappeared in the 1880s, but COHA provided different results. The figure below gives data about the frequency percentage and its disappearance throughout two centuries:

Figure (6) – The frequency per million words (*whithersoever*)



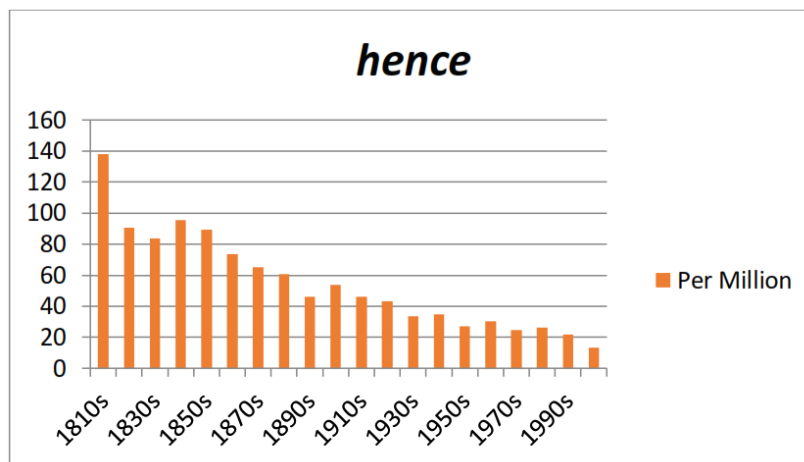
The results for this adverb are surprising in a sense because only 136 tokens were found within two centuries. In previous results, the number of tokens was not accounted for by a high frequency, as the large number of tokens is reflected in the higher frequency, except for the 1890s. As it is the case with all the previous adverbs, *whithersoever* has utmost usage in the 1840s, but with only 21 tokens in sixteen million words. This indicates that this word was infrequently used. There is not any further evidence that *whithersoever* is used in 1940s, 1950s and 2000s. Moreover, the highest frequency is 1.31% per million words and then, from the 1850s to 2000s, it fluctuates from 0.00 to 0.88.

G. *hence*

This word is the most frequent word of the group. Both OED and COHA confirm that this word is widely used. Its first occurrence in old records is in c1290. COHA gave 18236 tokens for hence, and a very surprising point is noticed while checking the results; in the 1810s hence has the smallest number of tokens but shows the highest frequency as shown in figure 7:



Figure (7) – The frequency per million words (*hence*)



The graph implies that *hence* is commonly used in language in nineteenth century. In 1810s, the corpus for the entire decade is very small compared to other recent corpora, but 163 tokens are found which denotes the highest frequency in the whole timeline. The adverb *hence* is frequent with high frequency per million words from 1820s to 1860s, although it dropped from 137.99% to 90.66% overall. Furthermore, there is an insignificant decrease from the 1860s until the 1890s where it rises again in the first decade of twentieth century. Generally in the twentieth century, there is a gradual reduction in percentage yet the minimum percentage is recorded in the 2000s at 13.09%.

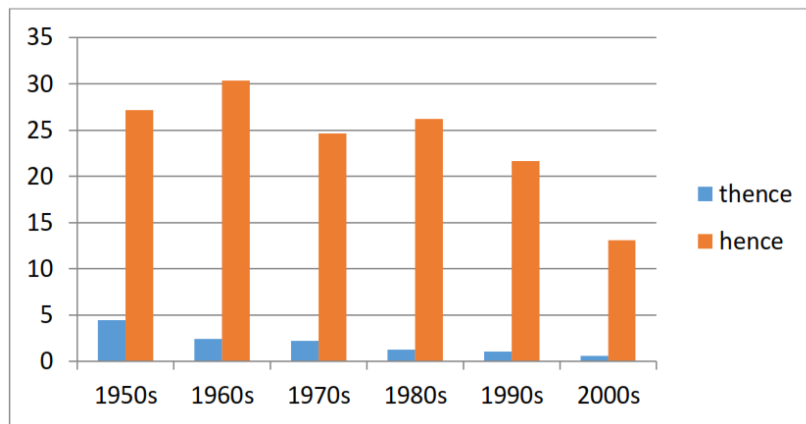
5. Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, the frequency of this group of adverbs has decreased to a great extent. Their frequency was not similar throughout the two centuries as some experienced an increase in usage whilst others fluctuated. However, they all share one common fact, namely in which all of them generally declined by almost 90% in last decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the most prominent figure that can be found from the results is the adverb *hence* which exhibited the highest percentage amongst all of the adverbs in spite of its gradual decrease during twentieth century, but it is still used to date. Conversely, *whithersoever* was found to be the least used adverb amongst the adverbs since it literally disappeared in PDE, whilst adverbs like *thither*, *thence*, and *whithersoever* showed similarities in terms of their increase in frequency in the first half of nineteenth century. Besides this, the use of *thither* and *hence* has a similar decline during the 1820s.

Concerning their frequencies in the twentieth century, the seven adverbs have the same decreasing flow but at different rates. In other words, the frequency of *thence* and *whence* continued to reduce and reached a minimum of 1% per million words. In contrast, according to Joseph and Janda (2003), as the result of the constant change in language and the formation of new words, *whither*, *hither*, *thither*, and *whithersoever* are shown to be very rare, especially in the second half of twentieth century. The adverb *hence* is used in PDE, but it was mainly frequent in the nineteenth century and even in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, it can definitely be said that these adverbs are very rarely used except *hence*. To make this point clear, based on their interesting findings which show a significant difference, a comparison between *hence* and *thence* is made to understand how frequently they are used during the 1950s to 2000s, as shown in Figure 8 below:



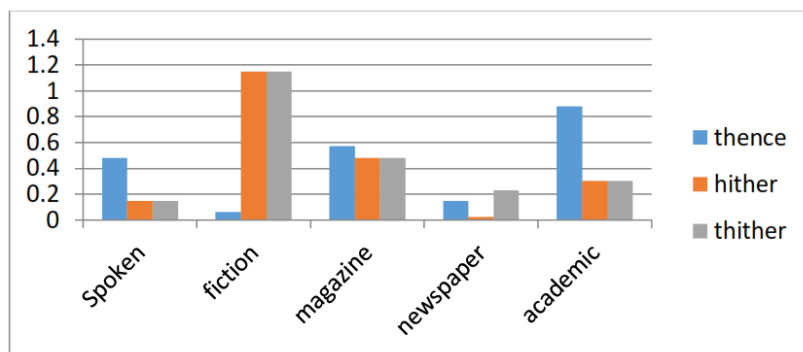
Figure (8) – The frequency per million words of ‘thence’ and ‘hence’ in (1950s-2000s)



The figure above illustrates a massive difference between the frequency percentages of the two adverbs in PDE. However, both are steadily declining with time. The frequency percentage of *hence* in 1950s is 27% which is a relatively high percentage compared to other adverbs, whilst *thence* is different because the highest percentage in the second half of twentieth century is only 4.5%. To put it in another way, the corpus that is presented in the 1950s is twenty-five million words, but *thence* is found 109 times whereas *hence* is cited 666 times. Although this figure is not very surprising, *hence* increases very slightly in the following decade and maintains a steady presence until the 2000s when it drops by almost 50%. In contrast, it continues declining until it reaches less than 1 per million.

It can be deduced that the usage of these adverbs, despite the rarity of their usages in PDE, is dependable on the types of texts they are used in, and for this reason, the three adverbs (*thence*, *hither*, and *thither*) are checked in COCA to see to what text types they have been used in the last decade of the twentieth century or in PDE. The results are displayed in the following figure:

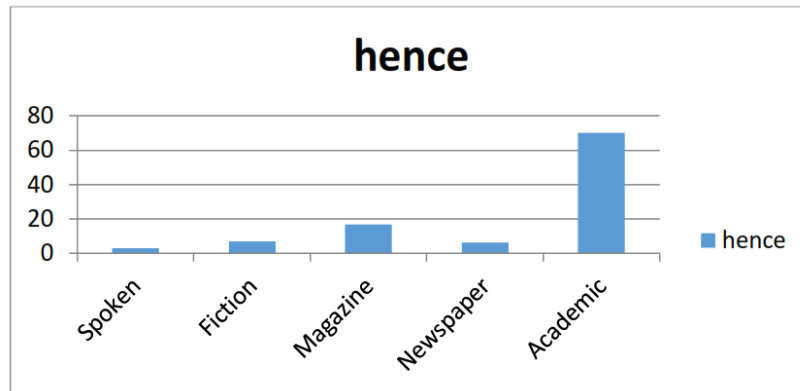
Figure (9) – The frequency of directional adverbs in different text types



According to figure 9, these rarely used adverbs are restricted to specific contexts. The data shows that *thither* and *hither* have virtually similar usages in all contexts except in newspapers where *thither* is used more than *hither*. Apparently, they are mostly used in fictions. The usage of *thence* is found typically in academic writings. However, the word *hence*, as previously mentioned, is the most commonly used in PDE compared to other members in the group; therefore, it is also checked in the COCA and the following results are found:



Figure (10) – The frequency of the adverb hence in text types



It is clear from the data that *hence* is used in academic texts. This also indicates that *hence* is not regularly used in spoken language due to the small proportion (2.82% per million words), whilst in academic texts, the percentage is 69.91% in a corpus of 91,066,191 words. Thus, to sum up, different results originated from different searches in the corpuses. However, the reason for the decline of frequency in PDE compared to the nineteenth century is left unanswered. Further, no academic work has focused on exploring the reason(s) behind this loss.

6. Conclusions

This study mainly aimed to study the frequency, infrequency, and the context of a group of directional adverbs used during the last two centuries. The directional adverbs were often used in OE, ME and also in early Modern English, but later their usage seemed to have disappeared. The three giant English corpuses COHA, COCA, and OED were used to search how long ago they were frequent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The search was modified to numerate the frequency tokens in the historical corpus and the various results are displayed. The overall track showed a decline in all adverbs' frequency, more specifically, in the last decades of the twentieth century, not only in adverbs, but a lot of other English vocabulary have lost their frequency throughout the course of history. The reasons for some of these are clear; such as the shift from personal pronoun *thou* to *you*, whereas the loss of frequency of directional adverbs is still in question. None of the historical linguistic books has yet investigated what might have triggered their loss. Yet a moot point was made by Sapir (1921) about the semantic change of these adverbs as there might have been more explanations for their infrequency in PDE.

There was a weak point in this study due to the lack of literature to examine the reasons. Nevertheless, explanations can clearly be identified by pioneering and conducting future research with such a focus. Additionally, there is a huge academic gap in this area since various studies can be taken to search other types of syntactic categories that are similar to these directional adverbs which may lead to plausible results. Furthermore, one can investigate the contexts and to what extent infrequent words are being used in PDE.

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نهمانى ئاوه لفرمانى ناراسته يى له زمانى ئىنگليزى: ليكؤلئيه وه يه كى ته جروبى

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رؤزگار يوسف عمر

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به شى ماتماتيك - كؤليزى زانست/ زانكؤى سه لاهه ددين-هه ولير

پوخته

زمان وهك بوارىكى گؤرىنى به رده وامى ژيان ئەزمونى گؤرانكارى جياواز له خؤده گريت كه ئەمانه له خؤده گريت: وشه و ريزمان و دهنگ. هه نديك وشه كه له 'ماوهى ئىنگليزى كؤن' به كارده هاتن ئىستا به كارنايهن. ئەم توؤزئينه وه به كار له سه ر له ناوچوونى ژماره يهك ئاوه لفرمانى ناراسته دهكات كه پيشتر و له 'ماوهى ئىنگليزى كؤن' زؤر به كارده هاتن كه چى له 'ماوهى ئىنگليزى ئىستا' نه مان. بؤ ئەم مه به سه و كؤردنه وهى داتا، هفت ئاوه لفرمانان هه لئازدووه. هه ر ئاوه لفرمانىك به جيا كاربان له سه ر ده كريت له 'كونووسى ئىنگليزى-ئهمريكى سهردهم (COCA)' و 'كونووسى ميژوويى ئىنگليزى-ئهمريكى (COHA)' و 'فهرهنگى ئىنگليزى ئوكسفؤرد (OED)' بؤ دؤزئينه وهى ريزه ي به كاره ينانبان و مانا و ئەو كؤنتيكتسى لئى به كارهاتوون له دوو سه دهى جياوازا. ئەنجامه كان ئەوه نيشاندهن كه كه موبونه وه يه كى به رچاوى ئەو ئاوه لفرمانانه هه يه. له گه ل ئەوه شدا، ريزه ي به كاره ينان گؤراني پتوه دياره له ماوهى ده يه كانى بؤ گه يشتن به نه مانىكى ته واوله 'ماوهى ئىنگليزى ئىستا' دا. له بهر نه بوونى كارى زانستى له مه ر ئەم دؤزه، هؤكارى له ناوچوونى ئەو ئاوه لفرمانانه تا ئىستا ناروونه.

وشه كليبيه كان: ريزه ي به كاره ينان، زمانه وانى ميژوويى، 'COCA'، 'COHA'، ئاوه لفرمان، كؤنتيكتس.

تلاشي الظروف الاتجاهية الإنجليزية: دراسة تجريبية

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ملخص

تشهد اللغة بطبيعتها المتغيرة تغيرات عدة. و تشمل هذه التغيرات جوانب عدة كالمفردات والقواعد والاصوات. فلم تعد تستعمل بعض المفردات التي أستعملت في اللغة الانكليزية القديمة. لذلك يعالج البحث قضية فقدان عدد من الظروف التي كانت تستعمل بشكل أساسي في اتجاهات اللغة الانكليزية القديمة، بينما أختفت في الوقت الحاضر. تم إختبار سبعة ظروف لتشكيل بيانات البحث. يعد أختبار كل ظرف على حده في 'المجمع اللغوي نصوص اللغة الانكليزية اللهجة الامريكية - المعاصرة (COCA)' و 'المجمع اللغوي نصوص التاريخية للغة الانكليزية (COHA)' و 'قاموس أوكسفورد الانكليزي (OED)' و ذلك من أجل إيجاد درجة تكرارهم و معانهم و سياق استعمالهم خلال قرنين من الزمان. أظهرت النتائج وجود إنخفاض واضح في الاستخدام هذه الظروف. على الرغم من ذلك فقد تفاوتت نسب الاستخدام لقرون الزمنية لتختفي اليوم تماماً من اللغة الانكليزية الحديثة. و بسبب نقص الجهد العلمي لمعالجة القضية فقدان الظروف، لا يزال سبب فقدان تلك الظروف غير واضحة.

الكلمات الدالة: درجات تكرار، علم اللغة التاريخي، COCA، COHA، ظروف، سياق