

Language surrounding poverty in early modern England: constructing seventeenth-century beggars and vagrants

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CASS

Corpus Approaches
to Social Science

CASS: Briefings

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About CASS...

The ESRC funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

Prof. Tony McEnery

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Life in seventeenth-century England was difficult for people living at the bottom of the social order. Demographic and economic changes, alongside political turbulence, resulted in huge increases in the numbers of poor people and, particularly, in those who were forced into beggary. At the beginning of the century, legislation was put in place which has become known as the old Poor Law which meant that some members of the 'deserving poor' (elderly or infirm people, widows with children, orphans) were eligible for welfare support; those who were deemed undeserving (the able-bodied unemployed) were not. In medieval times, being poor was not deemed to be a cause of shame but this changed in the early modern period. The seventeenth century, in particular, witnessed a hardening of attitudes to the poor and homeless people were viewed with increasing animosity.

This briefing concentrates upon attitudes towards a subset of poor people – a group who might today be termed beggars or vagrants. Seventeenth-century vagrants were a marginalised group: they were overwhelmingly illiterate and politically powerless. By undertaking a study of them, we hope to improve our understanding of a people who were effectively voiceless in their own time.

On a practical level, it is important to understand changing discourses on the poor because legislative change was influenced by changing public perceptions of poverty.

Research questions

1. What kinds of language were used to identify and describe beggars by 17th century writers?
2. What changes took place in terms of the type of language used or in the meaning of words as the century progressed?
3. What can this tell us about early modern English society?

Methods

We explored a billion words of writing from the seventeenth century from the database Early English Books Online (EEBO), which offers access to virtually every piece of literature printed in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and British North America between the years 1473 and 1700. By the use of computational tools, we compiled a list of the most commonly occurring words used to identify vagrants and beggars and identified language patterns in our corpus (collection of texts) to draw out the meanings of these terms.

We have not relied entirely on quantitative computer analyses but have also undertaken a qualitative investigation of seventeenth-century texts. Our findings below focus on four of the most commonly used words: *beggar*, *rogue*, *vagabond* and *vagrant*.

Beggars and vagrants

The term *beggar* was used more frequently than the other three words (see Figure 1). It peaked in the first four decades of the seventeenth century and then declined in usage. This was a period of economic crisis which directly impacted upon the wellbeing of poor people. *Vagrant* was also used slightly more frequently at the beginning of the century, experiencing another peak in usage between 1680 and 1700.

Again, this can possibly be explained by economic factors: although financial pressure on ordinary people eased between the 1660s and the early 1680s, the last decade of the century witnessed renewed crisis. Moreover, a social reform movement of the 1680s and 90s particularly targeted vagrants and this was reflected in the literature it produced.

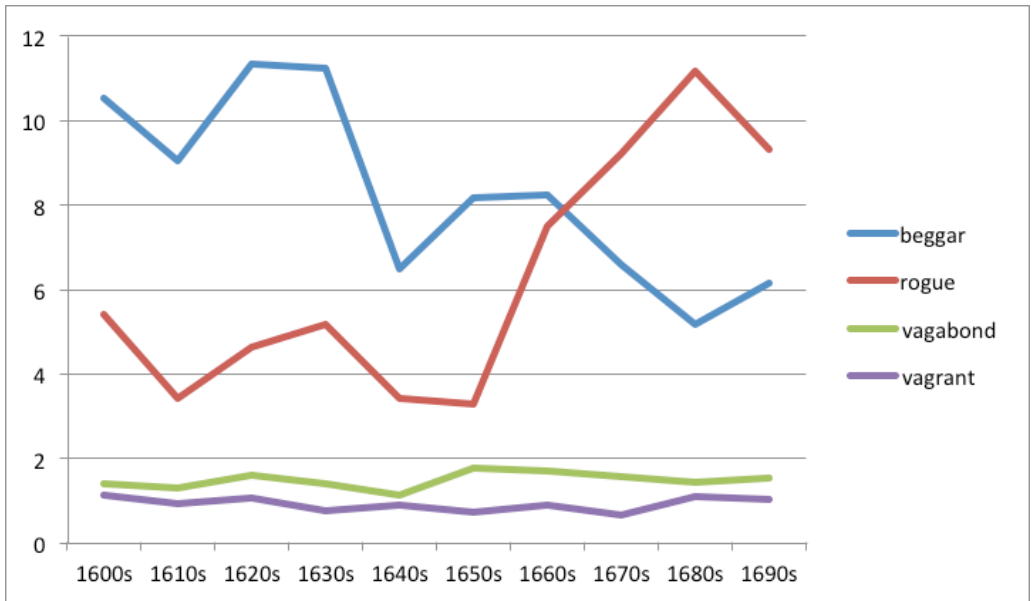


Figure 1. Frequency per million words of beggar, rogue, vagabond, and vagrant over the 17th century

The use of *vagabond* and *rogue* do not appear to be governed by the state of the English economy. *Vagabond* peaks between 1650 and 1670 – a period that witnessed Cromwell’s protectorate and the Restoration of the monarchy. It may be the case that writers were choosing to use the word *vagabond*, *vagrant* or *rogue* instead of *beggar*. *Rogue* peaked in usage in the final three decades of the century, appearing in popular literature which described the lives of different types of criminals including *cony-catchers* (thieves or confidence tricksters), *cut-purses* (pick-pockets), *cozeners* (scammers) and *foot pads* (thieves who targeted pedestrians).

These terms bled into real life as the proceeds of this court case for libel in 1662 demonstrate:

Action for this, said to a Freman and Scrivener in London, Thou Rogue. Conny-catching Rogue. Cozening Rogue. Cut-purse Rogue. art a Rogue, and a Conny-catching Rogue, a cozening Rogue, a cut-purse Rogue.

Many of the texts within our corpus are religious and the term *beggar* is used in rhetoric exhorting rich people to act charitably or comparing the lives of the rich with those of the poor. It also appears in a number of proverbs of the time e.g. 'to know one as well as a beggar knows his dish' or the slightly menacing 'the beggar will catch you by the back'. Vagrancy terms were used as popular insults but also could be used as terms of endearment for young females:

'Thou art a beggar.'

(play by Thomas Middleton, 1608)

'you are a damned rogue'

(play by Anthony Munday, Michael Drayton et al, 1600)

'Pretty Rogue! how she fires my heart!'

(play by Tate Nahum, 1693)

Beggars were usually described as male, often being referred to as *he*, *him*, and *fellow*. We know from poor relief statistics that parishes were particularly reluctant to grant poor relief to able-bodied males.

Legislation passed in 1572 judged people to be vagabonds if, among other things, they worked as pedlars, tinkers, bearwardes (bear keepers), minstrels or fortune tellers. These specific occupations were not highlighted in our texts but some writers present *counterfeit Egyptians* – the phrase from which the term *gypsy* is derived – as vagrants and highlight their association with palm reading.

Vagrancy is sometimes associated with particular ethnicities or religious faiths. References to vagrant Jewish and Arabian people are present in historical or biblical texts, as are mentions of vagabond monks who were a particular group condemned by St Benedict for rambling about the countryside in pursuit of good food and entertainment. The renewed persecution of Quakers during the first years of the Restoration is highlighted in references to *Vagabond Quakers*.

The term *vagrant soldiers* occurs particularly frequently in our corpus, highlighting problems caused by large numbers of discharged soldiers who were left unemployed and homeless after the English civil wars.

Another high frequency word, *number*, reveals that the vagrant population was thought to be increasing.

Sympathy and compassion

Writers were aware that beggars and vagrants experienced poverty and that their lives were difficult.

Beggar was modified by the adjectives *poor*, *poorest*, *needy* and *miserable* 5.8% of the time, while the words *tattered*, *rags*, *ragged*, *starving*, *starved*, *starve*, *hungry*, *sores*, *lice*, *diseased*, *poverty*, *misery* and *lousy* appeared in 2.8% of mentions of the word *beggar*.

Beggar is the only term to collocate (co-occur) with the words *alms* and, to a lesser extent, *relief*. Debate surrounding the word *alms* centred on whether or not beggars were worthy of aid.

Relief did not appear frequently alongside *beggar* until the 1650s, reflecting how provision for the poor was evolving from donations given in the form of charity (*alms*) to maintenance payments calculated by the authorities (*relief*).

There were surprisingly few negative references to beggars in the first decade of the seventeenth century. This changed in the following decade when the word most strongly associated with *beggar* was *sturdy*. *Sturdy beggars* was a phrase used to describe able-bodied adults who chose not to work and members of this group were deemed to be living illegally by the state. These people were portrayed in our corpus as being violent, lazy and food thieves.

As the seventeenth century progressed, beggars became associated with roguery, vagrancy and vagabondage. They were described as being bold, proud and foolish:

'...he became a fool, and a beggar , and a laughing-stocke to them...'

(essay by John Norden, 1620)

'THREE THINGS ODIOS and tedious.

1 A Beggar proud.

2 A rich man a liar.

3 An old man lecherous.'

(English language textbook by George Mason, 1625)

A frequent pairing of the word *refuse* with *beggar* does not refer to people refusing to give alms to beggars but actually portrays beggars as snubbing certain donations.

Vagabonds and rogues were tarnished with connotations of sexual immorality and vice: vagabonds were described as being *loose* and *vile* and the words *whore* and *base* often appeared in conjunction with *rogue*. A new proverb '*as drunk as a beggar*' became popular in the 1620s.

Writers, above all, chose to describe vagabonds, vagrants and beggars as being idle:

'It's a point of justice to whip an idle beggar, but more excellent to prevent Idleness and beggary...'

(sermon by Richard Vines, 1656)

Idle was not simply used as a synonym for unemployed; writers used it to mean lazy. Vagrancy was associated with criminality. The words *robbers* and *thieves* often co-occurred with the term *vagabond*.

Rogues, in particular, were strongly linked with lawlessness and untrustworthiness: *cheating, cheat, thief, lies, lying, steal, knave, rascal* and *villain*.

In 1598 legislation entitled *For the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars* ordered that 'incorrigible and dangerous rogues' be imprisoned or transported overseas.

In 1604, an early act of James I revived the practise of branding to punish and distinguish rogues: 'incorrigible' rogues were to be branded with the letter R on the left shoulder by means of a hot burning iron.

Other punishments included whipping, being sent back to one's birthplace and, at one stage, ear boring (where an iron bar was used to burn through the fleshy part of the ear). While historians don't fully know the extent to which these punishments were carried out, analysis of the texts does suggest that vagrants, vagabonds and rogues were indeed punished: the collocates whipped, punished, apprehend, apprehension, branded, banished, hang and hanged all appear frequently alongside the terms rogue, vagabond and vagrant. Beggars, however, were not usually described as being subjected to punishment.

Conclusions

- We have traced words that seventeenth-century writers used to identify vagrants. *Beggar* and *vagrant* are still used frequently today; the term *vagabond* is less common. *Rogue* is still used in present-day English but has changed in meaning in a subtle way. Although it still suggests villainy and someone who deceives by means of trickery, it is now often used to describe a tradesperson who cheats customers by

carrying out poor work or no work at all. Any association with vagrancy has vanished.

- *Beggar, vagrant, vagabond, and rogue* were value-laden in the seventeenth-century as they occurred alongside words that indicate unpleasant characteristics such as *proud, foolish, idle, drunk, and bold*. We have also obtained a valuable understanding of the ways in which contemporaries believed such people were punished - *whipped, hanged, banished, branded, and apprehended* - and how they made their livings - *robber, thieves, begging, alms* and *relief*.

- We have demonstrated that hostile attitudes to poor people emerged in the seventeenth century and, as this century progressed, beggars and vagrants were more likely to be described in negative terms. Moreover, when writing about the poor, seventeenth-century authors displayed a notable absence of compassion or awareness of social circumstances and instead used a discourse of blame.

- By increasing our understanding of how seventeenth-century writers viewed people living in poverty, it is easier to understand prejudices towards poor people in our own society: the existence of widespread antipathy towards the poor in present times can be traced back four hundred years. Attitudes which categorise, accuse, and condemn poor people are thus entrenched and are unlikely to be easily overcome.

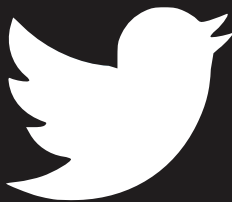
Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:

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