

**Placing prepositions in early and late Modern English texts:
Genre variation and idiolectal preferences**

The ‘proper’ place of prepositions in a sentence has been a matter of concern to grammarians, rhetoricians and literati from the mid-seventeenth century to the present day. The traditional eighteenth-century normative rule proscribes end-position in (1a), *preposition stranding*, and prescribes front-position in (1b), *preposition pied piping*.

- 1a. The book **which** I am reading **about** was written in 1400.
- 1b. The book **about which** I am reading was written in 1400.

Yáñez-Bouza (2007) traces the influence of the prescriptive tradition on the ‘correct’ use of these two syntactic constructions from 1500 to 1900. A number of previous studies have observed a historical stylistic drift in genres from the fifteenth to the late twentieth centuries which responds to functional (conscious and unconscious) changes in the social, historical and cultural background (Biber & Finegan 1989, 1992, 1997; González-Alvarez & Pérez-Guerra 1998). This paper develops the premise that the ‘flux’ in attitudes towards good and proper English runs side by side with the ‘flux’ in attitudes towards good and proper style (Finegan 1992). It will thus contribute to the field of historical stylistics by shedding light on the use of preposition stranding and pied piping in different genres and authors during the early and late Modern English periods.

The analysis is two-fold. On the one hand, I will present a detailed analysis of actual language usage in a variety of genres along the oral/literate continuum, namely scientific texts, medical prose, sermons, official and private letters, journals, diaries, plays (*Helsinki Corpus*, *ARCHER*). On the other hand, I will pinpoint cases of idiolectal usage within each genre, not only to illustrate manifest idiosyncratic preferences but also to show that authors’ styles might bias the results if underestimated (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 1989). Writers’ sensitivity to prestige values and their conscious response to changing aesthetic trends towards a more ‘purple’ prose will be particularly addressed (McIntosh 1998). All in all, this paper will demonstrate that the stigmatisation of preposition stranding is not only a matter of correctness but style played a major role as well.

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