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THE GRAMMAR OF IMITATION: A CORPUS LINGUISTIC
INVESTIGATION OF MORPHO-SYNTACTIC PHENOMENA
IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN NEO-LATIN

The empirical basis of the dissertation

The investigation is based on a corpus of neo-Latin prose literature by 13 Italian humanists, from which more than 2,000 subordinate clauses have been extracted for primarily quantitative analyses.

The use of moods and tenses in clauses with dum, cum, quia, ne, utrum, quis/quid and relative clauses is analyzed with respect to various factors such as genre, chronology, author, person, voice, negation, subordination, and sequence of tenses.
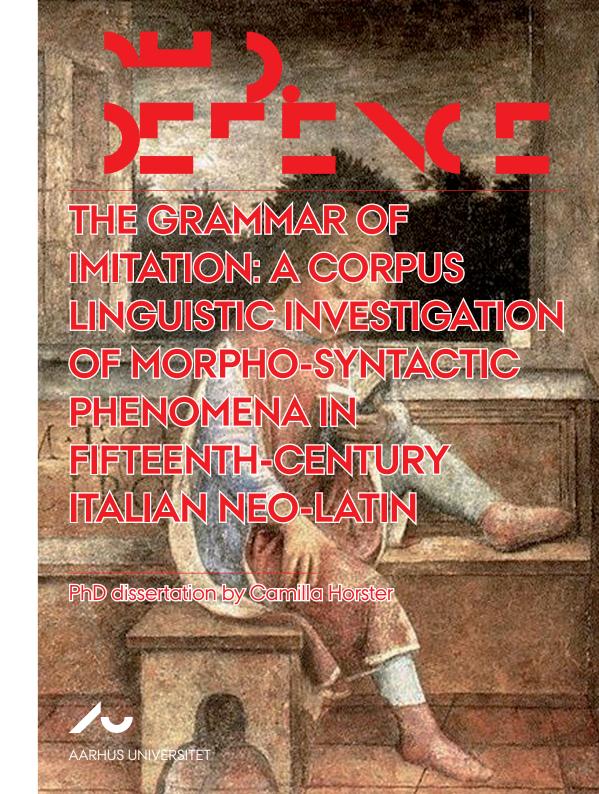Some linguistic elements are compared to data from existing corpora with Classical Latin texts, such as L.A.S.L.A. and the Perseus Treebank.

Contact

Camilla Horster
E-mail: slkcp@hum.au.dk
Tel: 22 20 38 63

Aarhus University
Department of Culture and Society
Building 1451-319
Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3
8000 Aarhus C.

PH.D.
DEFENCE

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PhD dissertation by Camilla Horster

AARHUS UNIVERSITET

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Summary of the main points of PhD dissertation "The Grammar of Imitation" by Camilla Horster, Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University.

The dissertation analyzes the Latin language written by Italian humanists in the 15th century. While the humanists aim at a Latin reflecting the language in classical literature, they are also influenced by Medieval Latin and Italian. This interplay of factors is studied in the humanists' use of grammatical mood and tenses.

Classical Latin, Medieval Latin and Italian Dialects
The dissertation shows that the humanists are successful in writing a Latin language which reflects the classical Latin model, and deviations from that which is allowed in classical Latin are rare. Elements that are characteristic only of medieval Latin are sporadic in neo-Latin. Medieval features are usually preferred by individual authors and are not common neo-Latin.

The most profound deviations from classical Latin are characteristics also of Italian, e.g.:

- more indicative in indirect discourse, especially when reporting 1st person's speech
- less strict sequence of tenses where it would result in conflicts with actual time reference

A Difference of Distribution, not a Difference of Nature
The dissertation considers neo-Latin a second language, a language acquired by authors with another mother tongue. As with other second languages, the influence from Italian on neo-Latin follows certain principles:
- elements from Italian are not generally transferred to neo-Latin if they are non-existent in the aimed-at model, classical Latin
- differences between neo-Latin and classical Latin are to be found in preferences for those possible Latin expressions that are more natural to an author with Italian as his mother tongue -- some even being over generalized to new environments

Intuitive Imitation and Grammatical Knowledge
The humanist approach to learning Latin is based on imitative reading – reading the classics with the purpose of adapting one's own Latin to the language of the literature. Renaissance grammars do not pay much attention to the general use of moods and tenses, and several obvious mistakes appear in their descriptions.

In the actual linguistic neo-Latin practice, the intuitive imitative approach appears to be more influential than the actual grammatical knowledge. In their prose language, grammarians often imitate perfectly classical Latin features even when they misinterpret them in their grammars.

Natural or Artificial Language?
Neo-Latin represents a unique linguistic situation, where a minor group of writers wish to change the norm of the language towards classical Latin and separate it from medieval Latin. Deliberate language change is unusual, perhaps even impossible, in natural languages. Neo-Latin therefore seems unnatural as a concept.

Yet, the dissertation shows that neo-Latin is in many respects used like a natural language, as it:
- is used in a community where authors agree on the form, rather than forming individual languages
- changes according to known principles
- conforms to universal characteristics of human language