Feature Discovery for Diachronic Register Analysis: 
a Semi-Automatic Approach

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Abstract
In this paper, we present corpus-based procedures to semi-automatically discover features relevant for the study of recent language change in scientific registers. First, linguistic features potentially adherent to recent language change are extracted from the SciTex Corpus. Second, features are assessed for their relevance for the study of recent language change in scientific registers by means of correspondence analysis. The discovered features will serve for further investigations of the linguistic evolution of newly emerged scientific registers.

Keywords: diachronic register analysis, correspondence analysis, linguistic feature evaluation

1. Introduction
The present paper describes semi-automatic procedures to discover features reflecting diachronic changes in scientific registers. Registers are patterns of language according to use in context, cf. (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). Findings about register change are relevant both for linguistic applications, e.g., discourse analysis, language pedagogy, translation studies, and NLP tasks, notably automatic text classification.

To discover candidate features for the analysis of register change, i.e., features that are distinctive diachronically, we carry out a corpus-linguistic analysis, which includes extraction and evaluation of candidate lexico-grammatical features from a diachronic corpus. The basis for our work is provided by register theory (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) and previous studies of recent language change, notably (Mair, 2006).

We address the following questions: (1) Which lexico-grammatical features are good candidates for the study of recent language change in written scientific English? (2) How can they be reliably extracted from text corpora?, and (3) Which of the candidate features are actually suitable for studying the evolution of scientific registers?

2. Data and Existing Approaches
2.1. Approaches to Register and Language Change
Register theory, e.g. (Quirk et al., 1985), (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) and (Biber, 1995), is concerned with linguistic variation according to contexts of use, which involve language use expressed in the co-occurrences of particular lexico-grammatical features, creating distinctive registers (e.g., in the scientific domain: the language of biology or linguistics).

Both contexts of use and language use change over time resulting in the evolution of registers: the existing ones become obsolete and new ones evolve (e.g., in the scientific domain: the language of bioinformatics or computational linguistics). Such changes are directly reflected in lexicogrammar, some features becoming rarer, others more frequent, and features cluster in novel ways.

One approach to the study of recent language change was developed by (Mair, 2006), who investigated the Brown corpus family for changes in preferences of lexico-grammatical selection in British and American English between the 1960’s and 1990’s. We test the features described by (Mair, 2006) for their suitability for the present task analysing their frequencies in SciTex, a diachronic corpus of academic English, cf. (Degaetano-Ortlieb et al., 2012). Our first extraction results show that there are two groups of potential feature candidates in our corpus: (a) lexical and (b) grammatical.

2.2. Data
2.2.1. Lexical features
As the linguistic reaction to the developing scientific disciplines we observe the evolution of new scientific registers, with the most prominent changes in lexis (particularly specialized terminology). Here, we focus on the word formation process of prefixation. Table 1 gives an overview of prefixes involved in the formation of new words over time, potentially also relevant in the scientific domain.

2.3. Grammatical features
Grammatical changes unfold much more slowly than lexical changes. However, the trends of their development are detectable by inspecting frequencies of use of competing grammatical variants, e.g. noun or verb complementation patterns, the use of voice, etc. Table 2 shows some of the relevant grammatical features for recent language change used by (Mair, 2006), which we generalise for our study.

1The Brown corpus family consists of four parts, the Brown corpus (1961, AmE), the LOB corpus (1961, BrE), the Frown corpus (1992, AmE) and the FLOB corpus (1991, BrE), each subcorpus containing text samples from written English of 15 broader registers (e.g., scientific, religious, fiction etc).
Table 1: Features for language change: prefixation

| feature                  | example                             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| up+VERB                  | update                              |
| down+VERB                | download                            |
| prefix+VERBing           | incoming, outgoing                  |
| post+NOUN or ADJ         | post-editing, postprocessing        |
| hyper+                   | hyperarticulation                   |
| super+                   | superscript, superset               |

Table 2: Features for language change: grammatical variants

| feature                  | example                             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| NOUN+for+NP+to-inf       | the need for linguists to meet      |
| VERB+to-inf              | begin/start to do smth              |
| VERB+(obj)+to-inf        | help (smth) to do smth              |
| VERB+(obj)+bare-inf      | help (smth) do smth                 |
| VERB+VERBing             | consider maximizing the metric       |
| VERB+obj+(from)+VERBing  | prevent smth (from) doing smth       |
| get+passive              | buffer will get chosen by processor  |
| modal verbs              | we shall be able to treat           |

3. Methods and Tools

3.1. Corpus and Overarching Research Interest

For our investigations we use the English Scientific Text Corpus (SciTex), cf. (Degaetano-Ortlieb et al., 2012), which contains full English scientific journal articles from nine disciplines. The corpus covers two time periods (each contained in an own subcorpus), the early 2000’s (DaSciTex) and the 1970’s/early 1980’s (SaSciTex), and amounts to approx. 34 million tokens. In this study, we focus on subcorpora representing ‘mixed’ disciplines, i.e., the disciplines in contact with computer science which form a new discipline in the time period investigated (see figure 1: computational linguistics (B1), bioinformatics (B2), digital construction (B3), microelectronics (B4)); cf. (Teich and Holtz, 2009) and (Teich and Fankhauser, 2010).

The corpus is annotated for sentence boundaries, tokens, lemmata and parts-of-speech by means of a dedicated processing pipeline (Kermes, 2011) and can be queried with the IMS Corpus Query Processor (CQP), cf. (Evert, 2005).

3.2. Procedures for Feature Discovery

To obtain features suitable for diachronic register analysis, we need to (1) extract instances of the candidate features (feature identification), and (2) assess them in terms of their relevance for further analysis (feature evaluation).

Feature identification As candidate features, we decide for the lexico-grammatical features presented in tables 1 and 2 above. To extract them for the two time slices and all nine registers of SciTex, we elaborate CQP-based queries, which contain both string-based lexical and grammatical constraints (e.g., part-of-speech information or sentence position).

Feature evaluation To distinguish features relevant for language change in scientific registers, we carry out a correspondence analysis on our data. Correspondence analysis is a multivariate technique which seeks to provide a low-dimensional map of the data usually plotted in a two dimensional graph (cf. (Baayen, 2008)). This statistical method works on observed frequencies and is able to show their relations to variables in one single space (cf. (Greenacre, 2007)). This suits our purpose as we want to investigate the relations between the observed frequencies of our extracted lexico-grammatical features and the respective subcorpora (variables). To perform the analysis, the ca package (cf. (Nenadić and Greenacre, 2007)) for the statistical environment R (cf. (Venables and Smith, 2010)) is used. The input for the analysis is a data frame which comprises features in rows and subcorpora in columns with the respective frequencies (see Table 3).

| feature                  | A.da | B1.da | C1.da | ... |
|--------------------------|------|-------|-------|-----|
| up+VERB                  | 271  | 105   | 48    | ... |
| down+VERB                | 8    | 30    | 13    | ... |
| prefix+VERBing           | 119  | 55    | 62    | ... |
| ...                      |      |       |       |     |

Table 3: Extract of the data frame for correspondence analysis

Correspondence analyses are performed on all A-B-C triples of subcorpora (e.g., A - computer science, B1 - computational linguistics, C1 - linguistics) for both time slices.
| query building blocks | comments | extracted examples |
|-----------------------|----------|--------------------|
| 1                     | pre-verbal material | This |
| 2 | [pos="V.*"] | verb | prevents |
| 3 | ( | object start | prevents |
| 4 | [pos="DT|PP|PDT"]? | one or none determiner | This |
| 5 | [pos="RB.*|JJ.*|VVN[N.*]{0,3} | up to 3 modifiers | us |
| 6 | [pos="POS"]? | one or none possessive | us |
| 7 | [pos="N.*|PP"]? | noun or pronoun | us |
| 8 | ) | object end | us |
| 9 | [word="from"&pos="IN"]? | optional from | from |
| 10 | [pos="V.*G"] | ing-verb | computing |
| 11 | ) | post-verbal material | Computing |

Figure 2: Query for extraction of verbs with two complementation patterns

![Graph](image-url)

Figure 3: Graph for correspondence analysis on the A-B1-C1 triple

(e.g., 2000’s: A.da, B1.da, C1.da; 1970’s/80’s: A.sa, B1.sa, C1.sa)\(^2\).

The output of the correspondence analysis is plotted into a two dimensional graph with arrows representing the observed frequencies of a feature and points representing the subcorpora, allowing the inspection of the arrow length and point position in relation to the arrows. The length of the arrows indicates how pronounced a particular feature is, see

\(^2\)We use .da for the DaSciTex subcorpus and .sa for the SaSci-Tex subcorpus.
(Jøseth and McGillivray, 2012) for details. The position of the points in relation to the arrows indicates the relative importance of a feature for a subcorpus. The arrows pointing in the direction of an axis indicate a high contribution to the respective dimension. Figure 3 shows the graph for the A-B1-C1 triple and the two time slices.

To assess how well our data is represented in the graph, we calculate the eigenvalues for each dimension with R (see figure 4, for the triple A-B1-C1 for both time slices). Good results are obtained by a relatively high cumulative value by the first two dimensions, as they are the ones used to plot the two-dimensional graph.

We thus obtain a clear idea about which of the candidate features are relevant for the study of language change in our corpus. In addition, the analysis allows us to see how pronounced the diachronic trends are according to discipline (e.g., use of shall in A.sa).

5. Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper, we have shown how features relevant for diachronic register analysis can be discovered semi-automatically. Our procedures enable us to extract and evaluate candidate features involved in register change, thus providing a basis for the analysis of linguistic evolution of scientific registers.

We will combine the features used in the present study with additional features we have used for register analysis before ((Degaetano-Ortlieb et al., 2012) and employ them to build a model of linguistic evolution of newly emerged scientific registers.

The procedures described in this paper will be integrated into dedicated processing pipelines for the semi-automatic analysis of register change, which can be applied in both linguistic studies and for NLP tasks. The results of studies of recent change in language will be valuable not only to languages-for-specific-purposes (LSP) and historical linguistics, but also to automatic text classification, where the search for relevant features is a core issue.

4. Results and Interpretation

Our extraction tool delivers information on feature frequencies for all candidate features described in section 2 in our corpus, as shown in Table 4. Detailed CQP-based queries, e.g., the one in figure 2 above, allow to reliably detect feature instances in the corpus.

The numerical results obtained for all candidate features provide the basis for the correspondence analysis. In the case of the A-B1-C1 triple, the cumulative value for the first two dimensions is 86.3% (see figure 4), i.e., the first two dimensions represent almost 90% of the data which indicates that our data is well represented in the graph. Similar values are obtained for the other A-B-C triples for the two time slices. Considering the y axis in figure 3, there is a clear separation according to discipline, with computer science (A.da, A.sa) in the top and computational linguistics (B1.da, B1.sa) and linguistics (C1.da, C1.sa) in the bottom. The strongest feature here is prefixation, notably the prefixes *hyper* and up. Considering the x axis, there is a clear diachronic cut between the data from the 2000’s and those from the 1970’s/80’s, with A.da, B1.da and C1.da on the left and A.sa, B1.sa, C1.sa on the right. The features whose arrows are situated in the direction of the x axis, e.g., get+passive and VERB+to-inf, contribute to the diachronic division. The feature shall, which is very pronounced, contributes to both the diachronic and the disciplinary division.

We carried out correspondence analyses for the other A-B-C triples for the two time slices in the same way. Taken together, we get the same tendencies for all triples of A-B-C, the first two dimensions always involved in the diachronic and discipline-related tendencies. Finally, to determine a cut-off between relevant and irrelevant features, we employ the chi-square p-value of <0.05. Table 5 shows which of the features tested are relevant for diachronic analysis (marked by checks).

Figure 4: Contributions of dimensions (A.sa, A.da, B1.sa, B1.da, C1.sa, C1.da)

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6. Acknowledgements

The project Register im Kontakt: Zur Genese spezialisierter wissenschaftlicher Diskurse (Registers in contact: linguistic evolution of specialized scientific registers) is supported by a grant from Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). We are especially grateful to Hannah Kermes for providing the necessary corpus processing pipeline. Also, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improving our paper. All remaining errors remain ours.

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| candidate features         | frequencies in SciTex |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
|                           | 2000’s     | 1970’s/80’s |
|                           | pm        | pc         | pm     | pc     |
| **lexical**               |           |            |        |        |
| up+VERB                   | 765363    | 76.54      | 234637 | 23.46  |
| down+VERB                 | 973881    | 97.39      | 26119  | 2.61   |
| prefix+VERBing            | 743304    | 74.33      | 256696 | 25.67  |
| post+NOUN or ADJ          | 423208    | 42.32      | 576792 | 57.68  |
| super+                    | 624113    | 62.41      | 375887 | 37.59  |
| **grammatical**           |           |            |        |        |
| NOUN+for+NP+to-inf       | 610052    | 61.01      | 389948 | 38.99  |
| VERB+to-inf              | 603188    | 60.32      | 396812 | 39.68  |
| VERB+(obj)+to-inf        | 735849    | 73.58      | 264151 | 26.42  |
| VERB+(obj)+bare-inf      | 764925    | 76.49      | 235075 | 23.51  |
| VERB+VERBing             | 636364    | 63.64      | 363636 | 36.36  |
| VERB+(obj)+(from)+VERBing| 529577    | 52.96      | 470423 | 47.04  |
| get+passive              | 1000000   | 100.00     | 0      | 0.00   |
| modal verbs               | 580658    | 58.07      | 419342 | 41.93  |

Table 4: Candidate feature frequencies in SciTex

| general categories     | features                                      | relevance |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|
| word formation         | prefix+VERB(ing)                              | √         |
|                        | prefix+NOUN/ADJ                               | √         |
| noun postmodification  | NOUN+for+NP+to-inf                           |           |
| verb complementation   | VERB+to-inf                                  | √         |
|                        | VERB+(obj)+to-inf                            |           |
|                        | VERB+(obj)+bare-inf                          |           |
|                        | VERB+VERBing                                 |           |
|                        | VERB+(obj)+(from)+VERBing                    |           |
| voice                  | get+passive                                  | √         |
| modal verbs            | shall, need to, ought                        | √         |
|                        | must, may                                    | √         |

Table 5: Features for diachronic register analysis

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