

Axel Bohmann:

Word dissemination along the S-curve of linguistic change

This talk explores the relationship between word dissemination and frequency change for a rapidly receding feature, the relative/interrogative particle *whom*. The success of newly emerging words has been shown to correlate with high dissemination scores. However, the reverse—a correlation of lower dissemination scores with receding features—has not been investigated. Considering word dissemination across texts, linguistic environments, registers, and topics, a general correlation between dissemination and frequency does not obtain in the case of *whom*. Different dissemination measures diverge from each other and show internally variable developments. These can, however, be explained with reference to the specific sociolinguistic history of *whom* over the past 300 years. The findings suggest that the relationship between dissemination and word success is not static, but needs to be contextualized against different stages in individual words' life-cycles. Our study demonstrates the applicability of large-scale, quantitative measures to qualitatively informed sociolinguistic research.