"The gully-hole of literature":
On the enregisterment of cant language in seventeenth-century England

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ABSTRACT

This essay places seventeenth-century literary renditions of cant, the language spoken by rogues and criminals in Early Modern England, into the context of "enregisterment" so as to examine its role in the process of recognition, categorization and legitimation of the canting tongue and the values it entailed. Literary representations of this variety became common in the period under analysis as a result of the criminal element that threatened the English population. Drama emerged as one of the main vehicles for the representation of cant, leading to the appearance of numerous plays that dealt with the life and adventures of English rogues. In the pages that follow, it will be argued that the study of these textual artefacts can provide valuable historical insight into the use of cant and the social connotations associated with it. In fact, the corpus-based analysis of the plays selected for this study has made it possible to identify both a common lexical repertoire and a set of sociocultural features that were associated with this underworld variety and its wicked speakers by the London non-canting audience. At the same time, it has shed light on the processes whereby this encoded speech came to index derogatory cultural values, which were spread and consumed thanks, in part, to dramatic performance, leading to the enregisterment of cant language and its recognition as a stable and unique linguistic variety.

KEYWORDS: seventeenth-century drama; cant language; enregisterment.

"Las partes bajas de la literatura": sobre el *enregisterment* del lenguaje *cant* en la Inglaterra del siglo XVII

RESUMEN: Este estudio se centra en textos literarios producidos en el siglo XVII que incluyen representaciones del lenguaje *cant* (germanía), la variedad utilizada por vagabundos y criminales en la Inglaterra moderna temprana, y los sitúa en el contexto del *enregisterment* para examinar su papel en el proceso de reconocimiento, categorización y legitimación del *cant* y los valores asociados a él. Las representaciones literarias de esta variedad se populari-

"A sarjeta da literatura": Sobre o *enregisterment* do *cant* (gíria) na Inglaterra do século dezassete

RESUMO: Este artigo situa as representações literárias, no século dezassete, do *cant* (gíria), a linguagem falada por malfeitores e criminosos na Inglaterra protomoderna, no contexto do seu *enregisterment*, de forma a examinar o seu papel no processo de reconhecimento, categorização e legitimação da linguagem do *cant* e dos valores nelo implicados. Representações literárias deste género tornaram-se populares durante o período em apreço

zaron en este periodo como consecuencia del ambiente criminal que amenazaba a la población inglesa. El teatro se erigió como uno de los principales vehículos para la representación del *cant*, lo que dio lugar a la aparición de numerosas obras sobre la vida y aventuras de los criminales ingleses. En las páginas siguientes, se expondrá cómo el estudio de estos textos puede proporcionar valiosa información histórica sobre el uso del *cant* y sus implicaciones sociales. De hecho, el análisis de corpus de las obras seleccionadas para este estudio ha permitido identificar tanto un repertorio común de palabras como un conjunto de características socioculturales que el público londinense no familiarizado con este lenguaje asociaba con esta variedad de los bajos fondos y con sus inmorales hablantes. Al mismo tiempo, ha arrojado luz sobre los procesos a través de los cuales este lenguaje codificado llegó a indexar valores culturales peyorativos que se difundieron y se consumieron gracias, entre otras cosas, a la representación teatral, lo que propició el *enregisterment* del *cant* y su reconocimiento como una variedad lingüística estable y única.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teatro del siglo XVII; lenguaje *cant* (germanía); *enregisterment.*

em resultado do ambiente criminoso que ameaçava a população inglesa. O drama emergiu como um dos principais veículos para a representação do *cant*, levando ao aparecimento de várias peças que lidavam com a vida e aventuras de malfeitores ingleses. Nas páginas que se seguem, argumentar-se-á que o estudo destes artefactos textuais pode providenciar uma valiosa compreensão histórica do uso do *cant* e das conotações sociais a ela associadas. Na verdade, a análise de corpus das peças selecionadas para este estudo permitiu identificar tanto um repertório lexical comum como um conjunto de traços socioculturais que eram associados a esta variedade do submundo e aos seus falantes malvados pelos públicos de Londres não fluentes na gíria. Ao mesmo tempo, esta análise torna mais claros os processos através dos quais este discurso codificado veio a indexar valores culturais depreciativos, que foram distribuídos e consumidos graças à representação dramática, entre outros meios, levando assim ao *enregisterment* do *cant* e ao seu reconhecimento como uma variedade linguística estável e única.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: drama do século dezassete; *cant* (gíria); *enregisterment.**

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the representation of cant language in seventeenth-century English literature, with an emphasis on drama. Literary renditions of cant language—the variety employed by rogues, beggars and criminals in the period—have received extensive scholarly attention on account of their literary value and their lexicographic potential in relation to the variety they portray (see, e.g., Coleman 2004). So far, however, there has been little discussion, if any, about the role that these textual artefacts play in

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* Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

the process of "enregisterment"[1] and dissemination of this register and the sociocultural ideas it entails.

For this reason, my main concern is to explore the literary representation of the canting tongue from a linguistic and sociolinguistic point of view by examining seventeenth-century roguish drama from the perspective of enregisterment so as to determine to what extent literary renditions of this variety contributed to the acknowledgement and subsequent legitimation of this form of expression. In taking this approach, I will perform a corpus-based qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis of the data I have extracted from two of the most emblematic seventeenth-century roguish plays available in an attempt to identify the most recurrent lexical, semantic and sociocultural canting features portrayed in seventeenth-century drama: Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's [2] *The Beggars' Bush* (1622) and Thomas Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688). These plays have been selected with the aim of providing a representative, well-balanced sample of this variety in the period, as they were published in the early and late 1600s, respectively. Data have been organized according to the information provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) and the two most relevant and comprehensive canting dictionaries in the period: Richard Head's *Canting Academy* (1673) and B.E.'s *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (1699), which I have accessed through the database *Lexicons of Early Modern English* (*LEME*).

2. Linking language and ideology: The notion of "enregisterment"

By means of the pioneering notion of "enregisterment" (see definition in footnote 1), Asif Agha investigated the emergence of

[1] According to Asif Agha's ground-breaking article "The Social Life of Cultural Value" (2003), the notion of "enregisterment" defines the "processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms" which indicate status according to particular schemes of sociocultural values (231).

[2] Although the play has later been attributed to John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, the edition selected for this study (1778) still reflects Beaumont's authorship. Therefore, in what follows, references to *The Beggars' Bush* will be made accordingly.

Received Pronunciation (RP) as the prestigious variety of spoken English. As shown in his study (2003), the dissemination of both prescriptive works such as pronouncing dictionaries and metalinguistic commentaries in books, newspapers, etc., during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries clearly favored the identification of RP as a stable and sustained variety, as well as the assignment of certain values to this form of expression, whose employment came to be regarded as a symbol of status in Britain.

Linguistic varieties are often loaded with distinctive sociocultural values and usually denote the geographical or social origin of the speaker, as well as his or her status, thus evoking specific identities. However, cultural values are not inherent in the particular features of varieties, but rather are "a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices, including discursive practices, which imbue cultural forms with recognizable sign-values and bring these values into circulation along identifiable trajectories in social space" (Agha 2003, 232). So, what are these discursive practices that lead to this process of value assignment and that give way to the enregisterment and ensuing circulation of specific forms as characteristic of a given linguistic variety?

Just as with RP, the enregisterment and spread of a variety depends on the dissemination of oral or textual artefacts that contain and exemplify it (Agha 2003, 243); that is, in the words of Johnstone (2009), it is determined by "metapragmatic practices" or "talk about talk" (160). The recurrent reference to a certain variety as a stable and unique form of expression helps to typify, empower and validate it, thus gradually creating, shaping and sharing the linkages between language, ideology and identity. When these metapragmatic practices become socially acceptable, as Paul Cooper argues, ideologies and attitudes about speech communities are indexed (2013, 34).[3] Hence, once a set of linguistic forms of a given

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[3] Following Johnstone's (2009, 164) and Beal and Cooper's (2015, 35) interpretation of Michael Silverstein's orders of indexicality, the process through which particular cultural ideologies come to be indexed or linked to specific linguistic varieties undergoes three necessary stages: a given set of linguistic features which are correlated with ideas about its speakers' class or region (first-order indexicals) become noticeable and start to be shaped by cultural ideologies concerning correctness, style, etc. (second-order indexicals). Finally, these features and the indexical significance of using them become linked with a specific social or regional identity (third-order indexicals), conveying the idea that speech and identity are inherently connected.

variety, whether phonological, lexical, morphological, etc., is evaluated according to a particular ideological framework, it is possible to say that that variety has been "enregistered," i.e., "represented collectively in the public imagination as a stable variety and maintained across time and region via practices that reiterate [its] value […] and its link to social status" (Johnstone 2009, 160).

The role of textual artefacts such as literary works and dictionaries representing a given variety becomes particularly important when dealing with the process of enregisterment in historical contexts. Writing is "a clear conduit by which the correlation between language and sociocultural values, as well as the ideas derived from it, are foregrounded, circulated and consumed" (Ruano-García 2012, 377). The fact that a certain writer consciously decides to use a particular dialect or sociolect in writing helps to characterize and disseminate that variety and the ideas it entails. Thus, the conscious use of a variety or register is in itself an "act of enregisterment" (Clark 2013, 461). Accordingly, in what follows, I will explore literary renditions of the canting tongue in order to unveil their function in the process of enregisterment and circulation of this underworld variety and the sociocultural values most commonly associated with it.

3. Cant in literature: *The Beggars' Bush* and *The Squire of Alsatia*

Widespread social concern with cant language began to appear in the sixteenth century due to the growth of the English criminal underworld that took place as a result of an outstanding increase in population. This led to migrations of people towards the cities, especially to London, causing unemployment, impoverishment, and enhancing criminal activity. Thus, the English population became obsessed with rogues and thieves, which led to a growing demand for information about the underworld, and one of the main tools to gain some insight into its activities and secrets was its language, "cant."

The early sixteenth century saw the first written descriptions of cant language, mostly in the form of short lists from which the famous roguish pamphlets of the second half of the century were derived (Mikalachki 1994, 120). These lists and pamphlets had a

defensive purpose and tried to expose the underworld tricks by unveiling its language so that, as Julie Coleman (2004, 183) points out, the purchaser could be protected against pickpockets and cheats. The initial safeguarding aim of these written artefacts soon started to change when they became "an object of aristocratic pleasure" (Blank 1996, 58). Canting lists began to be read as an entertainment (Coleman 2004, 183), and writers were quick enough to see the enticing literary possibilities that cant offered. Consequently, rogues and their language became a key element in the literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which gave way to the appearance of a new genre, roguish literature, that attempted to narrate the lives and adventures of English criminals, and in which cant language played a crucial role. According to Gotti (1999, 119), this new genre encompassed different literary forms, such as pamphlets or books, although drama emerged as one of the most popular vehicles to represent the underworld and its language in the seventeenth century.

As a consequence, an important number of the most renowned playwrights of the time made use of the contemporary popularity and interest in the criminal life and language to produce their plays, many of which have become part of the English literary canon and are still read and studied. This is the case of Beaumont (1584–1616) and Fletcher (1579–1625)'s popular comedy *The Beggars' Bush*, first performed at court in 1622 with remarkable success. Set in Flanders, the play tells the story of a group of beggars who are trying to find a new king. A wide range of canting terms is displayed throughout the play, which suggests that the authors may have been familiar with the thieves' secret language. Although no clear evidence of how they acquired this linguistic knowledge of the underworld has been found, Coleman (2004, 43) and Kinney (1990, 41) propose that the playwrights may have learned some of the terms they use in the play from Thomas Harman's list in his celebrated *Caveat or Warening for Cummen Cursetors* (1567) or, given its date of composition, from the canting list found in Dekker's *Bellman of London* series (1608), which is an imitation of Harman's work. Moreover, the fact that Francis Beaumont entered the Inner Temple in 1600 (Beaumont and Fletcher [1619] 2004, 3) might have allowed him to have a privileged peek into the criminals' language since the Temple was next to the White Friars area, nicknamed "Alsatia," where contemporary criminals were settled.

Another writer who obtained great success through the use of roguish literature was Shadwell (1640–1692), with his famous and widely successful play *The Squire of Alsatia* (Schintu 2016). By introducing the audience to the story of foolish Belfond Senior, who is misled by a group of rogues on his first arrival in London from the North Country, the play depicts the Early Modern English criminal underworld and its canting speech. Although Shadwell's connection with this variety remains unclear, it has been held that he gained his knowledge of the underworld during his time as a student since, like Beaumont, Shadwell studied in the Temple (Hand Browne 1913, 258–59).

By means of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data extracted from these plays, common sociocultural and linguistic features have been identified as characteristic of seventeenth-century English cant, which may provide a more refined understanding of how the underworld was staged before a non-canting London audience, and of the way these literary artefacts led to the identification and spread of a particular set of linguistic forms and cultural values that were gradually associated with, and understood as, characteristic of the canting language.

4. The enregisterment of seventeenth-century cant language: linguistic analysis

4.1. Qualitative analysis

The employment of cant language in drama involves the use in a dialogue of the different words and expressions, thus framing the dialogue within a specific context uttered by a certain character, allowing the audience to see how and to what purpose this type of language is applied. Cant in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Beggars' Bush* is employed for characterization purposes so as to set the rogues apart from the rest of the characters; even the names of some of them, like *Prigg* and *Ferret*, are cant terms.[4] It is worth noting that in this play the members of the court invade the beggars' society, pretending to be rogues during most of the action, which is rather unusual if compared with similar representations of the London

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[4] *Prigg* 'a thief'; *ferret* 'a dunning tradesman'. In what follows, and unless otherwise indicated, all definitions have been taken from the *OED*.

underworld. As such, "for a time, at least, beggars and aristocrats can hardly be distinguished" (Blank 1996, 60). However, cant is only used by genuine beggars who, in spite of their peaceful and merry nature, spend their lives in performing dishonest activities such as cheating, begging and pickpocketing. The beggars' speech is frequently employed in roguish rituals and for conversation, though its most crucial and distinctive function is, as argued by Coleman (2004, 43), that of arousing compassion when talking to outsiders. Rogues are aware of the moving effect that cant language has in the play's fictional society, and consciously employ it to their advantage when begging:

> *CLAUSE.* And keep afoot the humble and the common phrase of begging, lest men discover us.
>
> *HIG.* Yes, and cry sometimes to move compassion. (Beaumont and Fletcher 1778, 413)

In addition, cant is used to maintain the secrecy of the rogues' affairs and the exclusivity of their community. As a consequence, it creates the beggars' in-group in the play: a social group with its own lifestyle and language to which its members feel emotionally attached. As Paula Blank (1996, 60–61) explains, in this play the vagabonds' society is a reflection of the court, and thus, its language, cant, is understood as an elite speech. It acts as a marker of status within the in-group since it is described as the "learned language" (Beaumont and Fletcher 1778, 413), the language of the wise and prestigious, seen from the beggars' perspective. The canting tongue determines the membership of the group and shapes the identities of those belonging to it. However, outsiders are not always excluded by means of the use of language since the beggars very often translate their canting words for them. The passage in which the rogue Higgen translates into cant language the words of Clause, an impostor pretending to be a beggar, may serve to exemplify this:

> *CLAUSE.* That we must have, my learned orator, it is our will, and every man to keep in his own path and circuit.
>
> *HIG.* Do you hear? You must hereafter *maund* on your own *pads* he says.
>
> *CLAUSE.* And what they get there, is their own, besides, to give good words.

HIG. Do you mark? To cut *been whids*; that is the second law. (Beaumont and Fletcher 1778, 412–13)

Moreover, probably due to their unlawful but non-threatening condition, the beggars and their language are not usually pejoratively perceived by in-group outsiders, although their society is often regarded as vulgar, unruly and lazy. This is clear in the passage when Goswin, a rich merchant, gets surprised when he is told that the rogues' community has its own social organization:

GOS. 'Troth thou mak'st me wonder; have you a King and Common-wealth among you?

CLAUSE. We have, and there are States are govern'd worse.

GOS. Ambition among Beggars? (Beaumont and Fletcher 1778, 407)

The criminal society presented by Shadwell in *The Squire of Alsatia* is very similar to that displayed by Beaumont and Fletcher in some respects. Cant is again used by the rogues and lawbreakers who, although more violently, also rely on theft and trickery to earn their living. Cant has a prominent role in the play since, by means of its employment, the criminals create an in-group and define themselves in terms of the community. It is the tool that in-group members use to claim their membership of their particular society and shape their identities, expressing their bonds and loyalty to the group through language, which is presented as a vehicle for social ascendancy within the group. This can be observed in the social hierarchy of the criminals' in-group, in which the character of Cheatly, the most powerful rogue in the play, is presented as the linguistic authority, the one who possesses the widest knowledge of cant and teaches it to the other, less powerful criminals:

CHEAT. My lusty Rustick, learn and be instructed. *Cole* is in the language of the Witty, Money. The *Ready*, the *Rhino*; thou shalt be *Rhinocerical*, my Lad, thou shalt. (Shadwell 1668, 2–3)

This way, he positions himself as the head of the society of "the witty," as he calls it, the wisest figure of the in-group. Unlike *The Beggars' Bush*, and except for the cases in which Shadwell's criminals have social or economic interests and avoid cant or explain how to use it, they tend to stress the exclusivity of their group and mark themselves off from the rest of society through their language. Thus, the rogues increase the use of canting terms when talking to outsiders, and mock their inability to understand cant in order to

exclude them, becoming, as a result, a closed in-group. Finally, by means of the derogatory reactions of the non-roguish characters of the play to cant,[5] Shadwell depicts this variety in a very negative and contemptuous manner and advocates for the adoption of the language "spoken by the superior sort" (Blank 1996, 39): standard, London English, showing that cant was only well-regarded within the community in which it was used, that is, it had not public but covert prestige.

The mostly threatening and negative image of the canting society and language depicted in these two plays is not the only testimony that accounts for the pejorative perception of seventeenth-century cant language; contemporary metalinguistic judgements also describe this register in derogatory terms. The prefatory note to the canting glossary added to the 1778 edition of *The Beggars' Bush* reads:

> We shall proceed to the explanation of the Cant Terms made use of in this excellent Comedy, Beggars' Bush; not assuming to ourselves any very great merit from the depth of our researchers in the *gully-hole of literature*, and our proficiency in this *most vulgar part* of the *vulgar tongue*. (Beaumont and Fletcher 1778, 484)

As these lines show, cant was perceived as a very undesirable, vulgar language, and regarded as the worst of all the "vulgar tongue[s]." Similarly, a contemptuous reference to the canting tongue is made at the end of the epilogue to *The Squire of Alsatia*, this time by alluding to its dishonourable speakers:

> The *Cant* he hopes will not be long unknown, 'tis almost grown the language of the Town. *For Fops*, who feel a *wretched want of Wit*. (Shadwell 1668, 72. My emphasis)

Thus, the negative depiction of cant language articulated in *The Beggars' Bush* and *The Squire of Alsatia* is reinforced by contemporary accounts in literary works and in the short glossaries compiled throughout the century that confirm the generalized social rejection of this variety.

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[5] An example of these negative reactions would be Sir William's contemptuous comment on cant: "The Rogue […] spoke a particular Language which such Rogues have made to themselves, call'd Canting, as Beggars, Gipsies, Thieves and Jayl-Birds do" (Shadwell 1668, 10).

4.2. Quantitative analysis

Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Beggars' Bush* stands out for its profuse employment of a canting lexis. Up to sixty-three cant terms and expressions are documented in the play, which can be classified into twelve semantic fields: insults, appellations for beggars, food and drink, money, women and sex, trickery and theft, clothing, body parts, names of places, violence, animals and others (see Appendix 1). The first six groups constitute the largest semantic fields, which give us relevant information about the interests and activities of contemporary rogues. It is worth noting that, although the notion of violence is often closely related to roguish characters, the play only includes two terms to refer to it: *whip* 'to pierce with a sword-thrust; to run through' and *trine* 'to hang' (*LEME*, *The Canting Academy*). This exemplifies the peaceful nature of Beaumont and Fletcher's rogues, who are not interested in the use of violence to undertake their deceitful trade, and would rather use their wit than their sword.

The Squire of Alsatia is a pivotal text for later studies on canting lexicography due to the important number of cant words that it includes, and the fact that it provides the first documentation for many of them, or their first recorded use in English. I have counted sixty-two different cant terms which comprise words denoting pieces of clothing, food and drink (or the state of being drunk), insults, prostitutes, money, running away, trickery, and violence (see Appendix 2). As with the terms used by Beaumont and Fletcher, the most used and repeated words are those that denote insults, trickery, food and drink, prostitutes and, most of all, money. However, unlike the peaceful beggars of *The Beggars' Bush*, Shadwell's rogues make use of an important amount of violent vocabulary during their criminal activities—e.g., *lugg out* 'to pull, give a pull to, to pull by (the ear, hair, etc.); to tease, worry, bait', *sock* 'a blow; a beating', *whip* 'to pierce with a sword-thrust; to run through', among others—, which suggests that violence also played a very important role in the seventeenth-century underworld society and was inherent to their language.

The data obtained from a careful study of the canting lexis used in these two plays point to a common set of semantic fields around which the rogues' sociolect was constructed. In fact, Table 1 shows that the largest number and variety of words are related to the same

notions and interests, with the following semantic fields being the most salient: money, insults, women and sex, trickery and theft, food and drink, and violence. Data have been organized with regards to the lexical types, as well as the frequency of appearance of the terms (tokens) related to each semantic field:

Semantic field	Types	Examples	Tokens	Percentage
Money	15	*rhino* 'money', *hog* 'a shilling'	73	27.3 (73/267)
Insults	12	*prigg* 'a thief', *bully* 'the 'gallant' or 'protector of a prostitute'	57	21.3 (57/267)
Women and sex	11	*peculiar* 'a man's wife or mistress', *buttock* 'a common strumpet'	50	18.7 (50/267)
Trickery and Theft	15	*mill* 'to beat, strike, thrash; to fight, overcome', *maund* 'to beg; to ask'	35	13.1 (35/267)
Food and drink	10	*hum* 'a kind of liquor; strong or double ale', *prog* 'food'	34	12.7 (34/267)
Violence	6	*sock* 'a blow; a beating', *porker* 'a sword'	18	6.7 (18/267)
Total	69		267	99.8 (267/267)

Table 1. Most relevant semantic fields.

Clearly, the canting vocabulary found in *The Beggar's Bush* and *The Squire of Alsatia* is constructed around well-defined semantic frames among which the lexical repertoire referring to money notably outnumbers the other fields in terms of number and variety of terms, as well as frequency, followed by the terminology for insults, women and sex, which is also relatively frequent in the sample. Both plays helped, therefore, to circulate the idea that the main subjects to which the canting language referred were money, insults, women, theft, etc. and, consequently, that the rogues' chief interests included activities related to these fields. But, were there any particular words that these plays put forth more frequently as representative or characteristic of this underworld sociolect?

The comparative analysis of the canting lexis used in each of the plays brings to light that there are some specific terms which are consistently used and repeated in them; Table 2 (Schintu 2018, 106) includes the seven canting words documented in both plays and reports their incidence.

Cant term[6]	Tokens	Percentage
Prigg 'A cheat'	16	24.6 (16/65)
Ready 'Money in possession'	16	24.6 (16/65)
Whip 'To pierce with a sword-thrust; to run through'	12	18.5 (12/65)
Bowze 'Drink, or to drink'	9	13.8 (9/65)
Nab 'A hat, cap, or head; also a coxcomb'	6	9.2 (6/65)
Bully 'A supposed husband to a bawd, or whore; also a huffing fellow'	3	4.6 (3/65)
Rag 'A farthing'	3	4.6 (3/65)
Total	65	99.9 (65/65)

Table 2: Most recurrent canting terms.

As Table 2 shows, *prigg* and *ready* are quite frequent in the plays under analysis. It is worth noting that *prigg* is only found in *The Squire of Alsatia* with the meaning "a cheat"; Beaumont and Fletcher used it as the name for a rogue in their play. The fact that it was employed to identify a fictional criminal suggests that the word had some roguish sociocultural connotations which may have been salient enough so that the audience automatically associated the name of the character with a dishonest lifestyle. The terms *whip* and *bowze* also show a relatively high frequency. Interestingly, the word *bowze* is used with two different spellings—*bowze* and *bouse*—, in the compound nouns *bouzing-ken* and *benbouse*,[7] and in the form of an

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[6] All definitions have been taken from *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew,* except for *whip,* whose definition has been extracted from the *OED.*

[7] *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* defines *bouzing-ken* as "an Alehouse," whilst *benbouse* is glossed as "strong Liquor, or very good Drink."

adjective: *bowsy*, which the *OED* defines as "showing the effects of boozing or intoxication; influenced or affected by much drinking." *Nab*, *bully* and *rag* are less recurrent in the dialogues, but still they are present in both plays, which indicates that they may have been commonly understood as cant terms too. Remarkably, all these terms, with the exception of *nab*, belong to some of the main semantic fields outlined in Table 1: *ready* and *rag* refer to money, *prigg* and *bully* are insults, *whip* is a violent action, and *bowze* is related to drinking.

The repeated dramatic use of these terms suggests that there was some continuity in their representation throughout the 1600s. In fact, it might be assumed that the recurrent use and circulation of this set of words through dramatic performance possibly contributed to their identification as characteristically cant words by the rest of the population, thereby creating a framework for the literary articulation of the London underworld and its form of speech. It is worth noting that the data obtained are in line with contemporary non-literary accounts of cant language such as the renowned *New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew*, which glosses five of the six terms listed in Table 2: *ready*, *prigg*, *bouze*, *nab*, *bully* and *rag*; this undoubtedly acknowledges their canting status. The other word, *whip*, is likewise found in B.E.'s dictionary, yet as part of the expression *Whip thee through the lungs*, which is defined as 'run through the body with a sword'. *Bouze* and *nab* are also documented in Harman's groundbreaking *A Caveat or Warening for Commen Cursetors*, and Head's *Canting Academy* includes the compound *bouzing-ken*. These lexicographic testimonies provide further support for the linguistic image and treatment that cant received in *The Beggars' Bush* and *The Squire of Alsatia*, and at the same time emphasize their role as conduits via which ideas about this variety were constructed, circulated, received and assimilated by contemporary outsiders who were not native users of cant.

Modern lexicographic evidence provided by the *OED* points to the stability of this canting lexical repertoire across centuries. The dictionary records all the terms I have found in these two plays and highlights that four of them are markedly cant: *prigg, nab, rag, whip.* This reinforces the linguistic portrait that seventeenth-century roguish plays made of the underworld language and confirms their reliability as sources of information about it.

5. Concluding remarks

This study has been concerned with the analysis of literary renditions of cant language by means of the framework of enregisterment. The survey of the language employed in the plays selected has allowed the identification of a common set of linguistic and sociocultural features which were associated with this underworld variety in literature. In view of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data, it seems clear that the plays analyzed show enregisterment of the canting tongue and the values it entailed.

The steady representation of a particular set of lexical items—*prigg, ready, whip, bowze, nab, bully, rag*—organized around well-defined semantic fields such as money, insults, trickery, etc., contributed to the progressive identification of this lexical repertoire as characteristic of cant language in the public imagination, leading to the creation of fixed linguistic ideas that became differentiable and salient for the non-canting audience, and that were gradually spread by means of dramatic performance. The fact that all these forms appear documented in other earlier and/or later non-literary works confirms their cant status and strengthens the linguistic portrait made in the plays, which prove to be a faithful reflection of the linguistic setting of the period. In addition, the negative views of criminal characters and communities reflected in the plays and in contemporary metalinguistic comments greatly contributed to the creation of links between cant language and certain sociocultural notions. This way, the social rejection of cant speakers represented in these textual artefacts was transferred to their language, and, as a result, negative stereotypes were indexed to this variety: cant as the menacing language used by undesirable speakers that embodied certain features (unlawfulness, immorality, roguery, etc.) to undertake their unlawful trade and deceive the rest of the society.

Taken together, these findings confirm the crucial role of seventeenth-century dramatic representations of cant language in the process of enregisterment of this underworld variety since their existence proves the presence of third-order indexical links through which linguistic and sociocultural ideas about cant were indexed to this form of expression. As a result, these metapragmatic practices gave way to the articulation of seventeenth-century cant language, and allowed the circulation and the social spread not only of the

variety but also of the sociocultural values embedded in it, resulting in a stable, differentiable and sustained register.

6. Addenda

Appendix 1: Cant terms in *The Beggars' Bush* according to their semantic distribution.[8]

Semantic field	Cant terms
Insults	*Bully, cranke, ferret, maggot, prigg, ruffin*
Appellations for beggars	*Abram-man, clapperdudgeon, clowes, cove, dommerer, frater, harmanbeck, jarkman, maunders, patrico*
Food and drink	*Benbouse, bouze, bouzing ken, hum, strommel*
Money	*Lour, pig, rags, ready*
Women and sex	*Dell, doxy, mort, twang*
Trickery and theft	*Filch, lamb, maund, mill, niggled, prig the prancers, strike, strike all the cheats*
Clothing	*Belly-cheats, commission, lag of duds, nab-cheats*
Body parts	*Fambles, nab*
Names of places	*Ken, pad, ruffmans*
Violence	*Trine, whip*
Animals	*Cackling-cheats, grunting-cheats, margery-praters, rogers, tibs of the buttery*
Others	*Clapper, cut been whids, filches, fumbumbis, gage, prop, queere-cuffin, salmon, slates, stall*

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[8] See the OED and LEME for the meaning of these terms. Due to restrictions of space, it has not been possible to give all their definitions.

Appendix 2: Cant terms in *The Squire of Alsatia* according to their semantic distribution

Semantic field	Cant terms
Clothing	*Famble, joseph, rigging, nab, rumm nab, scout, tattler*
Food and drink (or the state of being drunk)	*Bowsy, bumper, clear, facer, prog*
Insults	*Bubble, bully, caravan, cod, mobile, prig, prigster, put*
Prostitutes	*Blowing, buttock, convenient, natural, peculiar, pure, tackle*
Money	*Cole, darby, decus, equip, george, hog, meggs, rag, ready, rhino, rhinocerical, sice, smelts*
Running away	*Rubb, scamper, scoure*
Trickery and theft	*Banter, cut a Sham, doctor, sealer, sharper, tatmonger, tatt*
Violence	*Lugg out, porker, sock, tilter, whip*
Others	*A Bolter of White-Fryers, Alsatia, crump, ogling, sharp, smoaky, trout*

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