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Overlexicalization and semantic variation in the Early Modern English naming of Native Americans

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ABSTRACT

This article takes as its focus the overlexicalization and semantic variation of reference terms for Native Americans in the period of the English exploration, settlement and colonization of Virginia (1584-1724). The corpus-assisted discourse analysis of pamphlets, first-hand accounts and letters taken from the *Virtual Jamestown Digital Archive* reveals that the lexical items used for naming the Natives undergo a process of amelioration and pejoration throughout the decades in relation to the changing historical and socio-cultural context in which they are used. An investigation of the definition and quotations of the same lexical items in the online version of the *OED* shows that although the dictionary attests the overlexicalization occurring for the Native Americans and reflects the most frequent lexico-syntactic patterns in which the words are found in the corpus, the choice of the quotations fails to account for instances of semantic variation and for the resulting ambivalent connotations of the terms.

Keywords: semantic variation, Native Americans, Early Modern English, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, *OED*.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of Early Modern English accounts of expedition and settlement in North America contributed to the construction of an ideology of colonization which was intended to elicit moral approval and financial support from the English readers at home (Borch 2004: 6; MacMillan 2013: 85). In order to this, authors were careful to construe the socio-cultural identity of the Native Americans in a way which could legitimize their own

right to settlement. Different – and at times ambivalent – representations of the Native Indians circulated in print, depending on the socio-economic and historical circumstances in which the texts were produced in the long course of the dispossession process (Jennings 1975; Fitzmaurice 2003; Moran 2007). When the Natives did not threaten the British interests but rather contributed to the process of profitable trade, they were represented as objects of curiosity and study, occasionally praised for their ingenuity and hospitality, more generally patronized for their cultural inferiority. Whenever they attempted to hinder the English expansion, they were represented as brutal savages and treacherous individuals.¹ The issue of the Native Americans and their treatment was highly controversial as it risked dividing public opinion. In linguistic terms, this anxiety was manifested in the abundance of quasi-synonymous reference terms for naming them. Such over-lexicalization indicates the contrasting concerns of society in the context of an emerging culture of colonization.

In this article, I shall conduct a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of first-hand accounts, letters and tracts written by explorers and settlers of Virginia in the period from 1584 to 1724 in order to identify the most common lexical items used to refer to the Native Americans and analyse their ideological bias in context. More precisely, I shall focus on features of semantic variation resulting from the changing socio-cultural and political variables throughout the colonization process, from the early years of exploration of the Newfoundland to the governmental policy of the state of Virginia at the beginning of the 18th century. Aspects of semantic variation will be assessed along the lines of pejoration and amelioration (Gramley – Pätzold 1992: 211). In the course of the analysis, I shall consider the extent to which the semantic changes found in the corpus are adequately reflected in the definition and examples in the *OED* of the same words during the same historical period. Indeed, the lexicographer's choice of quotations and sources unravels the way in which culture and society are represented both then and now (Simpson 2002; Brewer 2005).

2. Corpus and methodology

My data are taken from the *Virtual Jamestown Digital Archive* (hence *VJDA*). The corpus contains different text-types: letters, first-hand accounts and

¹ A similar ambivalent attitude towards the Native Americans appears in the 18th- and 19th-century documents. For an analysis of the representation of American Indians in the *Coruña Corpus of Historical English Texts*, see Dossena (2019).

tracts dated from the late 16th century to the beginning of the 18th century recounting the history of the colonization of Virginia. Although in many cases the idyllic representations of the prosperous life in the colony cannot be taken at face value, the texts are no less valuable as they reflect the logic of power and dominium at the basis of a Eurocentric view of the world through which social identities are shaped in discourse (Cecconi 2020). It is worth pointing out that many of these tracts were sponsored by the Virginia Company of London, beginning in 1606, and as a result they responded to the imperatives of profit and commercial interests usually camouflaged under the pretence of a Christian mission to the benefit of the pagan tribes.²

The texts will be examined according to the broad principles of corpus-assisted discourse analysis, theorized amongst others by Stubbs (1996, 2001) and Partington (2004, 2009). The methodology combines the usual qualitative approach to the analysis of the text with the quantitative analysis provided by Corpus Linguistics in the attempt to discover previously unnoticed regular patterns and link them to specific societal discourse practices. In this sense I follow Haarman and Lombardo's description of the approach as "a constant movement back and forth between data in the form of concordances, collocations and clusters on the one hand, and, on the other, the contextual information (i.e. the actual texts) retrievable by the software" (2009: 8). In order to achieve a better understanding of the ideological significance of certain lexical choices made by the author, my inquiry will extend beyond the textual context to include considerations concerning the wider socio-cultural and historical contextual matters within which the text has been produced (Pahta – Taavitsainen 2010: 551).

For the purpose of the analysis my database is divided into six sub-corpora covering about 25 years each and referred to as follows: Period 1 (1584-1599), Period 2 (1600-1624), Period 3 (1625-1649), Period 4 (1650-1674), Period 5 (1675-1699) and Period 6 (1700-1724). The segmentation of the corpus is intended to provide an insight into both distribution and semantic change of the lexical items throughout the six periods.

3. Analysis

My starting point was the elaboration of a wordlist from which I selected the first five most frequent words referring to the Native Americans, i.e. *Indian(s)*

² The Virginia Company Patent cites the natives as those who "live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God" and who are needful of "human civility and quiet government" (in MacMillan 2013: 85).

(1,074), *Sa(l)vage(s)* (211), *Inhabitant(s)* (173), *Heathen(s)* (77) and *Native(s)* (62).³ Below is a graph which shows their quantitative distribution across the six sub-corpora and provides evidence of the complex relationship which exists between choice of descriptors, identity construction and ideological propaganda in specific historical periods.

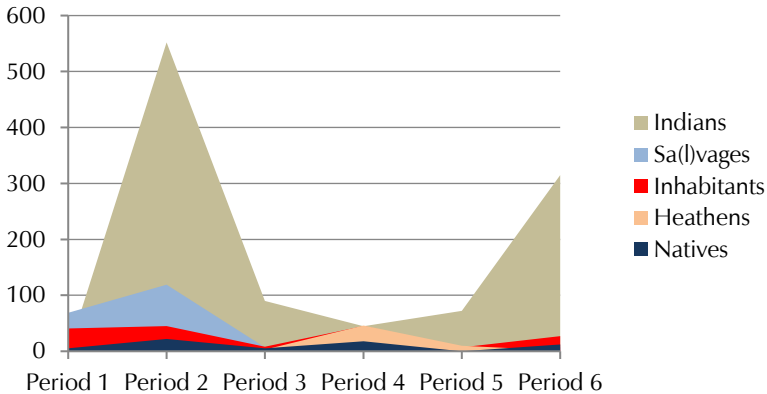


Table 1. Quantitative distribution of the reference terms for Native Americans in the *VJDA* from 1584 to 1724

Table 1 shows two peaks in the use of descriptors for the Native Americans. The first peak covers Period 2 and part of Period 3 when data register the highest frequency and variety of lexical items in the corpus. The decades at issue include the early phase of the settlement, followed by the two Anglo-Powhatan wars (1609-1614 and 1622-1632) ending in the Indians' defeat. In this early phase of exploration and settlement several competing descriptors were used by authors according to their ideological worldview or sensitivity.⁴ The second peak occurs at the beginning of the 18th century when the General Assembly of Virginia established issues of law and order for the new colonial society and authors undertook retrospective accounts

³ The computational analysis is carried out with the aid of the Sketch Engine software. Three major computational tools are used for the analysis: Wordlist, Word Sketch and Concordances.

⁴ Contrasting representations of Native Indians coalesce in the pamphlets of the time. Barlowe (1584) used the noble savage motif to portray Native Indians as endowed with a natural nobility. Hariot (1588) portrayed Indians as inoffensive on account of their military weakness. Lane (1586) depicted them as uncivil and untrustworthy (see Moran 2007).

of the British colonization, highlighting the controversial relationship with the Natives.

The noun *Indian(s)* is the most frequent throughout the 6 sub-periods with a peak in 1600-1624 and in 1700-1724. *Sa(l)vages* comes second but its usage is restricted to the years of the early settlement (1584-1599), the starving time (1609-1610) and the first and second Anglo-Powhatan war (1609-1614 and 1622-1632). In Period 4 (1650-1674) there is a drop in the use of *Indians* which is accompanied by increasing occurrences of *Heathen*. The word appears to replace *sa(l)vages*, which falls into disuse by the mid-17th century. The descriptor *Heathen(s)* characterises the period of William Berkeley's government in Virginia (1641-1652 and 1660-1677), when his friendly policies towards Native Americans led to the rebellion of the English colonists headed by the wealthy landlord Nathaniel Bacon (1674-1676). The word *inhabitant(s)* is particularly frequent in the early period of the settlement when the English settlers come into contact with the Natives. Its use lessens in the mid-17th century due to a shift in reference for the word. As the English settlers established their colonies in North America, they became the new inhabitants and the noun changed its original reference from American Indians to English colonists. In Period 6, when the noun is frequently used, it mostly refers to the English people as the Inhabitants of Virginia or Maryland and it is unpremodified. It is only in tracts on the history of colonization that the word refers back to the Native Americans, and in several cases it is premodified by the adjective *primitive* to distinguish it from the new inhabitants. A similar – though less frequent – ambiguity appears to characterise the use of the word *native(s)* in Period 6 caused by the emergence of a new generation of English colonists who had been born in Virginia.

3.1 *Indian(s)*

The most frequent lexical item is *Indian(s)*. Table 2 on the next page shows the quantitative distribution of neutral/positive and negative semantics in the most frequent lexico-syntactic patterns (1584-1724).

Indian(s) occurs mostly as subject of neutral verbs which reveal the colonists' interest in their behaviour as a model on how to survive in the new land. The lexical verbs for which *Indian(s)* is encoded as subject are verbs of movement, action and saying: *come, say, use, see, make, tell, bring, set, give, call*. Some of these verbs (i.e. *give/bring*) entail positive connotations as they are meant to represent the American Indians' friendship and hospitality towards the newcomers.

- (1) The Indians came presently down the River: they leaped on shore, and declared to the Governour, That they were subjects of a great Lord, whose name was Aquixo. (*Virginia richly valued*, 1609)
- (2) Our provision now being within twentie dayes spent, the Indians brought us great store both of Corne and bread ready made. (*A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents*, 1608)

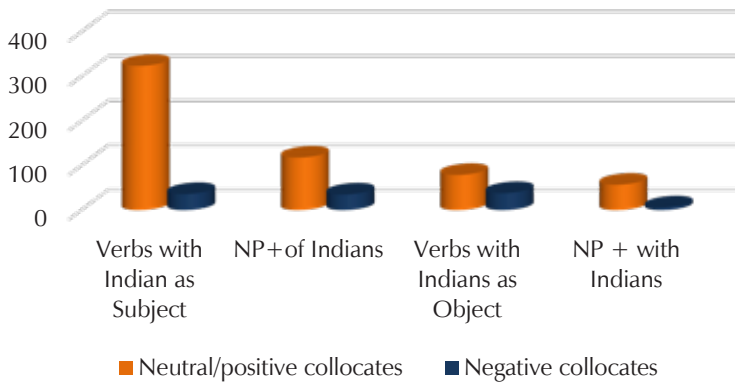


Table 2. Distribution of neutral/positive and negative collocates in the most frequent lexico-syntactic patterns of *Indians* in *VJDA*

Especially in the early phase of exploration and settlement the positive representation of the Indians was meant to reassure investors and travellers of their inoffensiveness and generosity, from which they would be able to make good profit. The second most frequent lexico-syntactic construction is [NP] *of* Indians, where the nouns occupying the [NP] slot vary according to the changing relationship between the Indians and the English settlers as the century progresses. Indeed, while the neutral lexemes in the [NP] slot (e.g. *canoes, number, cabins, language, conversion, corne, fashion, minds*) are quantitatively more salient than the negative ones, a closer inspection of the concordances reveals the ambivalent nature of the relationship between the two ethnic groups in moments of crisis. For example, in the context of the Anglo-Powhatan war of 1622 and the starving time which preceded it, the negative lexical items (e.g. *in the hands, attack, treachery, spy, conspiracy, cruelty/ies, dispight, spoile, ambush*) register an increase as the English settlers need to stress the treacherous character of the Indians in order to justify their Massacre and violent subjection (41%). In the next decades, negative semantics drops considerably in relation to the toleration policy adopted by

Governor Berkeley in the mid-17th century (12.5%) to peak again (68%) in the period of Bacon's rebellion (1675-1699), as shown in table 3.

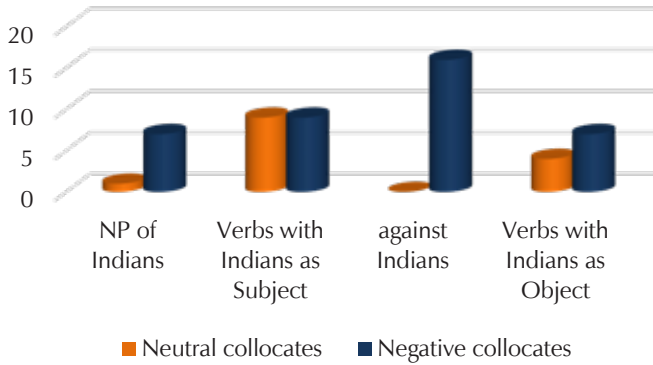


Table 3. The distribution of neutral/positive and negative collocates of *Indians* in the period of Bacon's Rebellion (Period 5)

The most frequent construction sees *Indian(s)* as subject of lexical verbs with negative meaning (e.g. *perpetrate, learn (not yet), knock, torture, torment, kill*) or as subject of lexical verbs which – as a result of semantic prosody – acquire a negative connotation in context (*draw in, surprise, devise*). For the first time the construction *against the Indians* peaks as the pattern *with the Indians* drops. The construction [NP] of *the Indians* features a predominance of negative semantics, as documented by the collocates *cruelty/ies of, in the hands of, bloody proceedings of, destruction of*

- (3) these Indians draw in others [...] to their aides: which being conjoynd [...] they dayly committed abundance of unguarded and unrevengeed murthers upon the English, which they perpetrated in a most barbarous and horrid manner. Cruelties of the Indians By which means abundance of the Fronteare Plantations became eather depopulated by the Indian settlers, or deserted by the planters fears, who were compelled to forsake their abodes to find security for their lives; which they were not to part with in the hands of the Indians, but under the worst of torments. (*A Narrative of the Indian and Civil Wars in Virginia, 1675-1676*)

This diachronic change in the distribution of neutral and negative semantics of *Indian(s)* shows how its meaning is dependent on the ideological

imperatives of the time, oscillating between stereotypical representations of Natives as inoffensive and naive people in periods of relative stability and as savage enemies when fighting for supremacy (Dossena 2019: 16). In Period 6, when the colonization process is brought to completion, neutral terms peak again and negative semantics shrinks. Now there is a renewed interest in Indians and their geographical provenance, as the following clusters reveal: *American Indians, neighbour Indians, the East Indians, shore Indians, the native Indians, Canada Indians, Maryland Indians*. The most frequent colligational structure is *Indians* as subject with neutral and descriptive verbs referring to their nature, manner and habits (e.g. *have, be, use, do, make, call, take*). Neutral semantics also prevails in the second most frequent pattern [NP] *of Indians* (*use of, custom of, language of, manner of, fashion of, pastime of*), since authors are now describing Indians as objects of curiosity and study in their histories of the British Colonization.

In the *OED* the lexeme *Indian(s)* is defined as “a member of the aboriginal peoples of (any part of) the Americas; an American Indian” and is attested in the following quotations:

- (4) “1576 H. Gilbert *Disc. Discov. New Passage Cataia* sig. f.ii^v Those Indians..came onely through our Northwest passage.” (*OED*)
- (5) “1612 Bacon *Ess. (new ed.)* 88 The Indians of the West have names for their particuler gods, thoughe they have no name for God.” (*OED*)
- (6) “1662 E. Stillingfleet *Origines Sacrae* iii. iv. §8 The tradition of the Flood is among the Indians, both in New France, Peru, and other parts.” (*OED*)

The choice of the sources reflects the *OED*'s preference for literary and scholarly quotations (Brewer 2008: 120; Gulliver 2016: 75), the only exception being the work of the explorer, Humphrey Gilbert, who, however, never reached North America. The examples confirm the semantic preference of *Indians* for neutral and descriptive collocates referring to trade, movement and customs. In this regard, the appearance of the neutral lexical verbs *come* and *have names* in the *OED* is consistent with the quantitative salience of verbs of movement and saying in the *VJDA*. The quotations also feature two frequent colligational structures for the word *Indians*, i.e. Indians as subject and Indians as object. However, they fail to account for the quantitative and

qualitative significance of the pattern [NP] of *Indians*, whose salience emerged from the corpus-assisted analysis. As shown in the previous paragraph, the lexico-syntactic construction is interesting for investigating the ambivalent relationship between English settlers and Native Indians at different points in time. In this sense, the *OED* does not record the semantic change of the word but shows instead a one-dimensional representation of the *Indians*.

3.2 *Sa(l)vage(s)*

Sa(l)vage(s) is the second most frequent lexical item in the *VJDA* and occurs mostly as noun plural.

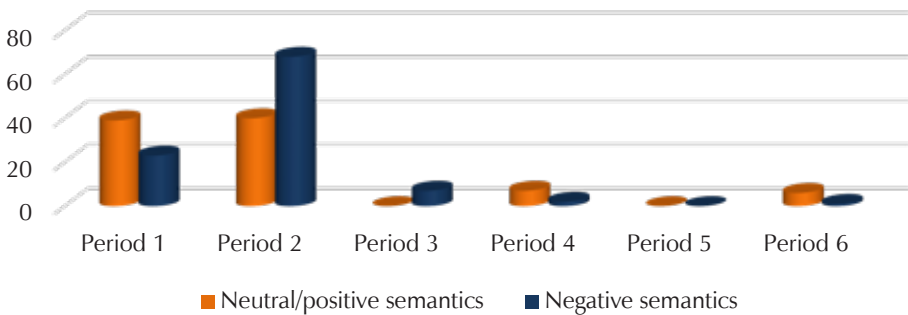


Table 4. Distribution of the neutral/positive and negative semantics for the word *Sa(l)vages* in the *VJDA*

The table shows the alternation of neutral and negative semantics across the six periods. In Period 1, *Indian(s)* has not yet appeared and the word *sa(l)vage(s)* is used as the main reference term for the Natives of the country. It is mostly found in neutral or even positive semantic networks due to the period of relative stability that the early settlers experienced in the new land:

- (7) the *Savages* became so friendly that they often visited the English and dined with them. (*Two Tragical Events*, 1622)

Although *sa(l)vage(s)* underwent considerable alteration of meaning through the decades as the colonists' socio-economic needs evolved, one constant feature of its semantics was the 'uncivil' status of the referents. It was by means of the logic of the "Ignoble Savage" that the English colonists managed to justify the occupation of their territories (Jennings 1975; Williams 1992; Bickham 2005):

- (8) such policy may be used by friendly signs, and courteous tokens towards them, as the savages may easily perceive (were their senses never so *gross*) an assured friendship to be offered them. (*A True Report of the Late Discoveries*, 1584)
- (9) there would be no labour under Heaven like this, to reduce them to civility. (*Virginia: More especially the South part thereof*, 1650)

The most frequent patterns in Period 1 are *sa(l)vages of* + [NP] (e.g. *Savages of the Maine*, *Savages of Moratok*, *Savages of the Ile*) and *sa(l)vages + inhabited, dwell, call* by which the English settlers describe the geographical distribution of the Native Americans in the regions. As already mentioned, the high frequency of neutral/positive semantics is consistent with the Virginia Company's instructions, according to which savages had to be described in relatively mild and tolerant terms in order to foster the commercial interests of investors in the colonization schemes (Jennings 1975: 74).⁵

The negative semantics of the word reaches its peak in Period 2 during the long Anglo-Powhatan war (63%). At that time the Powhatan was a community of more than 30 different tribes who occupied the lands of Tidewater Virginia from the Potomac River in the north to south of the James River, and parts of the Eastern Shore. The Chiefdom was ruled by Chief Powhatan, considered by the English settlers as the king of the savages (Gleach 1997). Three major lexico-syntactic patterns for *sa(l)vages* characterise the tracts of this period in which the word undergoes a process of pejoration beginning from the very moment in which the Native Indians unexpectedly attacked the English Captain Gabriel Archer.

The first pattern in order of frequency is [NP] of *Sa(l)vages* where the NP encodes two different semantic fields: a negative semantics of cruelty and deception (i.e. *furie, treachery, danger, malice*) and a positive semantics of news providers (*information, relation*).

- (10) Our forces are now such as are able to tame the fury and treachery of the Savages: our Forts assure the Inhabitants, and frustrate all assailants. (*A True Declaration of the estate of the Colony in Virginia*, 1610)

⁵ In the context of the failure of the Roanoke settlement, the quantitative findings in period 1 also reveal the emergence of a negative perception of the savages as untrustworthy and cruel people. In this regard, consider the quotation from Ralph Lane: "[it is] of mine opinion that we were betrayed by our owne Savages, and of purpose drawn forth by them upon vaine hope to be in the ende starved" (*An Account of the particularities of the employments of the English men left in Virginia*, 1586, contained in the VJDA).

- (11) we may by this peace, come to discover the countrey better, both by our own travells, and by the relation of the Savages, as we grow in familiarity with them. (*A True Discourse of the present estate of Virginia*, 1614)

The second pattern is *Savages + be + [predicative]*, e.g. *great thieves, lustie, nothing but hypocrisy and deceit, false and great hypocrites*.

- (12) this conduct of the savages was nothing but hypocrisy and deceit, they only awaiting a favorable opportunity to kill out the English. (*Two Tragical Events*, 1622)

The third pattern is passive + *by Sa(l)vages*, with 7 occurrences of the cluster *were cutt off and slayne*:

- (13) And those being Spente and devoured some weare inforced to searche the woodes and to feede upon Serpents and snakes and to digge the earthe for wylde and unknowne Rootes where many of our men weare Cutt off of and slayne by the Salvages. (*A True Relation by George Percy*, 1609-1612)

The last pattern features the collocation of *sa(l)vages* with words referring to animals:

- (14) There came the Savages creeping on all foure, from the Hills like Beares. (*Observations gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southerne Colonie in Virginia*, 1606)
- (15) all the rest dancing about him, shouting, howling, and stamping against the ground, with many Anticke tricks and faces, making noise like so many Wolves and Devils. (*Observations*, 1606)

In Period 3 the word maintains the same negative connotations as in period 2, though its use drops to 7 occurrences.

- (16) If God has not abated the Courages of the Savages in that moment of time, they so treacherously slew the English. (*A Perfect Description of Virginia*, 1649)

From Period 4 to Period 6 *sa(l)vages* maintains a low frequency and the proportion of negative semantics shrinks too (18%). This re-neutralization of

the word should be interpreted in light of the toleration policy adopted by the Governor of Virginia. In the concordances, savages are represented as possible helpers of the English colonists in the plantation and the common colligational structure features *sa(l)vages* as object of verbs such as *invite*, *encourage*, *show*.

- (17) It will be good for you to encourage the Savages, when they finde any bottoms in the woods, to bring them to you, that you may get of the race, and seed to increase it. (*The Reformed Virginian Silkworm*, 1652)
- (18) And let me tell you, being desirous that you may do all things with the least cost and labour to you, and to invite also the *Savages* to the work for their own gain. (*The Reformed Virginian Silkworm*, 1652)

The *OED* reports the two spelling variants of *savages* (*savage/salvage*) and its predominant usage as plural noun, which is consistent with my findings in the *VJDA*. Two major definitions are provided in the dictionary: that of *savage* as “a person living in a wild state; a member of a people regarded as primitive and uncivilized” and that of “a cruel or brutal person; (also) a person who is coarse, rough or uncouth”. With respect to the first definition, a group of quotations from 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century authors and explorers attest the meaning of *sa(l)vages* as inhabitants of regions in Asia (W. Lithgow), North America (Ralph Lane, Swift) and the West Indies (J. Smith and E. Ward) and document their trade relationship with the English settlers as well as the settlers’ reliance on their reports and guidance for survival:

- (19) “1585 R. Lane *Let.* 12 Aug. in *Trans. & Coll. Amer. Antiquarian Soc.* (1860) 4 10 I leave to certyfye your honor of what Iyekelyhuddes founde, or what the savvages reporte of better matters.” (*OED*)
- (20) “1612 J. Smith *Map of Virginia* ii. i. 3 Wee traded with the Salvages at Dominica.” (*OED*)
- (21) “1632 W. Lithgow *Total Disc. Trav.* vi. 292 Some scattering Arabs, sold vs Water... Two of which Sauages our Captayne hyred, to guide vs.” (*OED*)
- (22) “1698 E. Ward *Trip to Jamaica* (ed. 3) 10 The next Morning the Salvages Man’d out a Fleet of their Deal Skimming-dishes.” (*OED*)
- (23) “1726 Swift *Gulliver* II. iv. ii. 18 I..took out some Toys, which Travellers usually carry for Presents to the Savage Indians of America.” (*OED*)

The neutral representation of the savages as partners in trade and information providers reflects the findings in the *VJDA*, though it is curious that the choice of quoting Ralph Lane as source in the late 16th century is not consistent with the author's renowned scorn of the Native Americans and his preference for negative semantics (see note 5).

The remaining quotations are mostly taken from literary sources (Shakespeare, Flecknoe and Defoe) where the word usage loses its geographical reference to American Indians while retaining the meaning of pagan people and guides for explorers. There is only one quotation from Flecknoe's *Enigmaticall Characters* which attests the barbarity of the 'uncivil' but it is a literary source dated 1658 and can be considered only partially representative of the negative semantics of treacherousness and beastly violence attributed to the American Indians in the first half of the century.

- (24) "1658 R. Flecknoe *Enigmaticall Characters* 67 Would tame fierce Lions,
and civilize barbarousest Savages." (*OED*)

Regarding the second definition of *sa(l)vages* as cruel or brutal people, this usage is found no earlier than 1609 and again in a literary source (Shakespeare), whilst there are no quotations which refer to the treacherousness and fury of the savages of Virginia and North America from 1584 onwards.

- (25) "1609 Shakespeare *Troilus & Cressida* v. iii. 51 Hect. Fie sauage, fie.
Troy. Hector then 'tis warres." (*OED*)
- (26) "1696 T. Comber *Disc. Offices* 114 But who would imagine, that our
Christned Albion should breed such Salvages?" (*OED*)
- (27) "1706 Ld. Godolphin Let. 22 Oct. in H.L. Snyder *Marlborough-Godolphin*
Corr. (1975) II. 720 Some measures ought to be conceived for
putting a stop to these savages." (*OED*)

By and large, the quotations in the *OED* reflect the neutral representation of *sa(l)vages* as partners in trade and guides for survival but apparently fail to account for the semantic change of the word which occurs in periods of crisis. Literary and theological sources predominate and even when first-hand accounts of explorers are quoted, the preference for neutral semantics obscures the ambivalent attitudes of the colonists towards 'the primitive and uncivil'.

3.3 *Inhabitant(s)*

The third most frequent lexical item is *inhabitant(s)*, commonly in the plural form. In Periods 1 and 2 the word refers to the Natives of the Newfoundland and occurs premodified by the adjectives *naturall* (10), *native* (3), *first* (2), *old*, *ignorant*. It is commonly encoded as subject of verbs of action and verbs of naming: *use* (17), *call* (13), *make* (12) and in the construction *inhabitants of* + [place] (16): (i.e. *the inhabitants of the Maine; of the all countrie, of that countie* (3), *of the countrie* (1), *of Secotan, of Virginia* (3), *of Mexico* (1)).

It is in Period 2 that for the first time the word appears in the pattern *inhabitants of the colony* in the Proceedings of the Virginia Assembly in 1619.⁶ The cluster marks a turning point in the usage of the word, since from now on *inhabitant(s)* acquires a double referential meaning and can be applied both to the Native Americans and the English colonists. In Period 3 the two meanings coexist though the word usage drops from 45 to 8 occurrences. It is likely that – to avoid ambiguity – authors opt for other words to refer to the Native Americans at this stage (e.g. *Indians, Savages*). This shift of reference from Native Americans to the English colonists appears to be officialised in Periods 4 and 5 when the colonists are permanently settled in the territories and the word denotes their new legal status. The most frequent pattern is *inhabitants of* + [place] followed by issues of governance and land administration, e.g. *Inhabitants of Virginia* (5), *of Maryland* (3), *of the Colony/ie* (3), *of the side* (2), *of the North Side* (1), *of the Province* (1). In Period 6, the ambivalent referential meaning of the word re-emerges as authors recount the history of the colonization of Virginia.

In the OED *inhabitant* is defined as “one who inhabits; a human being or animal dwelling in a place; a permanent resident”. It is also specified that in its early use the word was found only in the plural, the singular rarely occurring until late in the 16th century, as confirmed in the VJDA (3% of occurrences). The following quotations are reported for the period examined:

- (28) “1588 R. Parke tr. J.G. de Mendoza *Comm. Notable Thinges* in tr. J.G. de Mendoza *Hist. Kingdome of China* 345 They did baptise certaine of the inhabitanche.” (OED)

⁶ The quotation reads as follows: “Their fourth Petition is to beseech the Treasurer, Counsell and Company that they would be pleased to appoint a Sub-Treasurer here to collecte their rents, to the ende that the *Inhabitants* of this Colony be not tyed to an impossibility of paying the same yearly to the Treasurer in England”. (*Proceedings of the Virginia Assembly*, 1619).

- (29) “1593 *Tell-Trothes New-yeares Gift* (1876) 42 This cite... hath so dispersed her inhabitaunce into the other partes of the cuntrey.” (OED)
- (30) “1594 T. Bowes tr. P. de la Primaudaye *French Acad.* II. 408 If we consider both the house and the inhabitant, wee shall see that [etc.].” (OED)
- (31) “1615 G. Sandys *Relation of Journey* 217 Frequented with Leopards, Bores, Iaccalls, and such like sauage inhabitants.” (OED)

The quotations do not refer to the inhabitants of North America in the period of the discovery and settlement of Virginia.⁷ Indeed, with the exception of Sandys’s work, the 17th-century use of the word is not recorded. Moreover, in Sandys’s *Relation of Journey*, the derogatory collocation *sauage inhabitants* does not find any correspondence in the *VJDA* where *inhabitants* usually maintains a neutral semantics even in moments of crisis. For example, during the Anglo-Powhatan war, the word is used to refer to the peaceful communities of Native Americans who were victims themselves of “the savages of Powhatan”. The choice reveals a more positive attitude towards the Natives and assumes a more peaceful and cooperative relationship between them and the settlers (see example 10).

3.4 *Heathen*

The lexical item *Heathen(s)* has 76 occurrences: 64 as noun in the form *the Heathen*, 9 as adjective and 3 as plural noun in the phrase *the Heathens*. The word is mostly used as adjective in the early phase of the settlement (Period 1 and 2) and takes on a negative semantic prosody as a result of its proximity to the word *devil*.

- (32) but my opinion is that their heathen priests, who are the tools of the devil, were constantly working upon the credulity and ignorance of this people to make them believe that the English had come to exterminate them in the same way as the Spaniard (*Two Tragical Events*, 1622)

⁷ Two of the quotations reported above are taken from texts translated from Spanish (de Mendoza) and from French (Primaudaye). The Romance languages very probably influenced the use of the word in the English translation.

- (33) what is more excellent, more precious and more glorious, then to convert a heathen Nation from worshipping the divell to the saving knowledge, and true worship of God in Christ Jesus? (*A True Discourse* 1614)

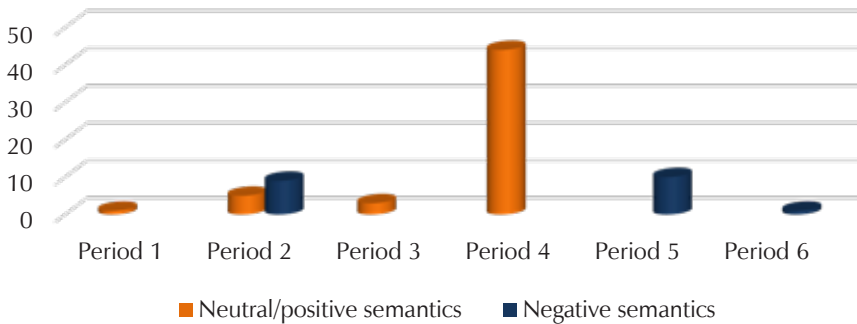


Table 5. Distribution of the neutral/positive and negative semantics of the word Heathen in the *VJDA*

Similar negative connotations characterise the occurrence of *Heathen(s)* as noun in proximity to words such as *Satan*, *ashamed*, *malice*. In Period 3, the years of Governor Berkley's toleration policy, the use of the word peaks and a process of amelioration changes its semantics. The Heathens are no longer represented as malicious believers in the devil but rather as victims of their own ignorance of God's existence. The most frequent pattern is [NP] + *of the Heathen* (25%) especially in the form *Conversion of the Heathen* (4) or *way of Converting the heathen* (1). This word usage has neutral meaning and reveals an attempt on the part of the authorities to establish uniformity of worship through conversion and moral exempla. While at that time the words *sa(l)vages* and *Indians* collocate with negative lexical items referring to the laziness, baseness and cowardice of the Natives, the choice of *Heathen* reveals a more compassionate and benevolent attitude.

The second most frequent construction contains *Heathen* as object with verbs such as *bring*, *win*, *gain*, *persuade* all referring to the conversion plan.

- (34) so likewise it obstructs the hopefulest way they have, for the Conversion of the Heathen, which is, by winning the Heathen to bring in their Children to be taught and instructed in our Schooles. (*Virginia's Cure*, 1661)
- (35) No hopes therefore of bringing the Heathen in love with the Christian Religion; whil'st so many evill and scandalous consequents attend the

Christians scatter'd manner of planting in that wilderness. (*Virginia's Cure*, 1661)

There follows the pattern [modifier] + *Heathen*, where the adjectives have neutral or event positive meaning: *poor* (4), *discreet and sober* (2), *rational/l* (2) and *vertuous* (1).⁸

- (36) and little hopes have the poor Heathen of redresse, whilst they see that Day so far neglected by the Christians. (*Virginia's Cure*, 1661)
- (37) for if a sober discreet Heathen (and there are many such) should reply, Why hath not every Parish one of them, and Ministers belonging to them? why do no the Christians build their houses nearer them, that they may come oftner to them? why are they not better built? [...] what defence could and ingenuous Christian make, which should not at once both shame himself and the Christians he would defend? (*Virginia's Cure*, 1661)

The quotations reveal a sense of pity towards the unbelievers and at the same time denounce the moral laxity of the Christians, which is detrimental to the desired peaceful coexistence with the Natives.

A drastic change in the semantics of the word occurs in period 4, when *Heathen* undergoes a process of pejoration apparently replacing the negatively connoted word *sa(l)vage(s)*. The occurrences of *Heathen* in the corpus are fewer in this period (10) but they all feature negative semantic prosody. The most frequent pattern is [NP] + *of the Heathen* which echoes the negative semantics of [NP] + *of the Indians, of the Savages*:

- (38) Exposed to the Incursion, and murder of the Heathen (*The Declaration of the People against Sir W. Berkeley*, 1676)
- (39) they judged too remiss in applying meanes to stop the fewrye of the Heathen (*An Account of our later Troubles in Virginia*, 1686)
- (40) as the only man fitt in Verginia to put a stop to the bloody resolution of the Heathen (*A Narrative of the Indian and Civil Wars in Virginia In the Years 1675-1676*)

⁸ The only negative premodifier appears in the noun phrase *rigid heathen*, referring to those heathens who are most difficult to convert as a result of their extremist position.

The second most frequent pattern is [premodifier] + *heathen* with derogatory connotations:

- (41) for in a very short time they had, in a most inhumane manner, murdered no less than 60 innocent people no ways guilty of any actual injury done to these ill-discerning, brutish heathen. (*A Narrative of the Indian and Civil Wars in Virginia, In the Years 1675 and 1676*).
- (42) For having in that unjust Gaine, betrayed and sold, His Maties: Countrie, and the Liberties of his Loyall Subjects to the Barbarous Heathen. (*The Declaration of the People, 1676*)

The process of pejoration in the semantics of the word is consistent with the political context of the time characterised by Bacon's fight against the Native Indians and by his harsh opposition to Berkley.

The *OED* records the usage of *heathen* as adjective from 971 as referring to "people holding religious beliefs of a sort that are considered unenlightened". For the period under consideration, the dictionary provides three quotations from theological works where *heathen* has neutral semantics and appears within noun phrases reflecting those found in the *VJDA*: *heathen priests* and *heathen-men*, the latter referring to the times of Ancient Greece and of Abraham. However, there is no attestation of the adjective *heathen* being used for the Native Americans at the time of the English settlement and of its negative semantics:

- (43) "1563 W. Fulke *Goodle Gallerye Causes Meteors* ii. f. 13 Helena was of the Heathen men, taken as a Goddess the daughter of Iupiter and Leda." (*OED*)
- (44) "1627 R. Sanderson *Serm.* I. 263 Abimelech, an heathen-man, who had not the knowledge of the true God of heaven to direct him." (*OED*)
- (45) "1706 M. Tindal *Rights Christian Church* 96 Made familiar to such Practices by the Heathen Priests." (*OED*)

The occurrence of *the Heathen* as collective noun is attested from 1000. There is only one quotation for the period examined and it is taken from John Milton's tragic drama *Samson Agonistes* "Spread his name Great among the Heathen round". Again, there is no attestation of the word being used

to refer to the Native Americans, nor to its ambivalent semantics, shifting from positive/neutral to negative according to the historical and political circumstances. The only quotation in the *OED* which refers to the Native Americans is dated 1736 and is taken from the *Works* of the theologian John Wesley. It provides evidence of the use of *Heathens* as plural noun, which is only occasionally found in my dataset:

- (46) “1736 J. Wesley *Wks.* (1872) I. 25 My brother and I..went to pay our first visit in America to the poor Heathens.” (*OED*)

The quotation is nonetheless consistent with the occurrences of *poor heathen* recorded in the *VJDA* at an earlier time (1650-1674) and documents the same compassionate attitude towards the Heathen which characterised the period of Berkley’s government in Virginia.

3.5 *Native(s)*

Native(s) is the last lexical item to be examined. Its usage in the *VJDA* reflects both the general and specific definitions of the word reported in the *OED*. In its general meaning of “a person born in a specified place, region, or country” the word commonly refers to the English settlers and to England as the country of origin.

- (47) Lord blesse England our sweet native countrey, save it from Popery, this land from heathenisme, & both from Atheisme. (*For the Colony in Virginea Britannia*, 1612).
- (48) a very considerable number of nobility, clergy, and gentry, so circumstanc’d, did fly from their native country, as from a place infected with the plague [referring to the English Civil War]. (*A Voyage to Virginia*, 1649)

In its specific meaning of “a member of the indigenous ethnic group of a country or region, as distinguished from foreigners, esp. European colonists”, the word refers to the Native Americans and oscillates between neutral and negative semantic prosody, although it is used most frequently with neutral prosody (72%).

- (49) Every particular season (by the relation of the old inhabitants) hath his particular infirmity too: all which, if it had been our fortunes to have

seated upon some hill, accommodated with fresh springs and clear air, as do the natives of the country, we might have, I believe, well escaped. (*A True Reportory of the Wreck and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates*, 1610)

- (50) The devil has through the medium of the priests such an influence upon the natives that they only waited for a good opportunity to extirpate the foreigners. (*Two Tragical Events*, 1622)

The most common patterns for *natives* as plural noun referring to American Indians are *natives of* + [NP] (36%), and *natives* as object (31%).

- (51) We never perceaved that the natives of the Countrey did voluntarily yeeld them selves subjects to our gracyous Sovraigne, nether that they took any pride in that title. (*The Tragical Relation of the Virginia Assembly*, 1624)
- (52) He had not seen any native, or any thing in human shape, in all his round, not any other creature besides the fowls of the air, which he would, but could not, bring unto us. (*A Voyage to Virginia*, 1649)

In period 6 the *VJDA* registers the first occurrence of *native* as referring to an Englishman who was born and living in Virginia. The person concerned is the author of *The History of Virginia in Four Parts* (1722), Robert Beverly, who refers to himself as “A native and inhabitant of the place” and who – discussing the condition of servants in the colony – explains that they “become as free in all respects and as much entitled to the liberties and privileges of the country, as any of the inhabitants and natives are, if such servants were not aliens”. Although these two occurrences of *natives* as referring to Virginians remain isolated in the corpus, they still give an insight into the increasing ambiguity in the referential meaning of the word from the second half of the century. It was just at that time that the term *Virginians* began to be used to designate the new generation of English colonists who had been born in the Newfoundland, as distinct from *our natives*, i.e. the English settlers who had been born in England and then moved to Virginia and from the American Indians who were simply named *natives* or – in Period 6 – *native Indians*. The relexicalization from unpremodified *natives* into *native Indians* (41% of occurrences) appears consistent with the necessity to specify the referential meaning of the word in the complex ethnical scenario.

- (53) This, and a great deal more, was the natural production of that country, which the native Indians enjoyed, without the curse of industry. (*The History of Virginia in Four Parts*, 1720)

In the *OED* there are no quotations recording the usage of the cluster *native Indians* in the context of North America. Nonetheless the relexicalization process from *natives* to *native(s)* + [Nationality] is attested for other populations, as the following quotation from a translated work shows:

- (54) “1687 A. LOVELL TR. J. DE THÉVENOT *TRAV. INTO LEVANT* I. 59 The native Turks are honest People, and love honest People.” (*OED*)

The specific meaning of *native(s)* is recorded in several quotations from geographical books, essays, histories and fiction:

- (55) “1603 R. Johnson in tr. G. Botero *Hist. Descr. Worlde* 153 He committed no lesse an error in suffering the Natiues to keepe their possessions and to inhabit all their townes.” (*OED*)
- (56) “1631 J. Smith *Advts. Planters New-Eng.* iv. 10 More [land] to spare than all the natives of those Countries can use and culturate.” (*OED*)
- (57) “1652 P. Heylyn *Cosmographie* iv. ii. sig. Oooo3^v Inhabited by the Natives only, though the Portugals did sometimes endeavour a Plantation in it.” (*OED*)
- (58) “1695 W. Temple *Introd. Hist. Eng.* (1699) 5 The North-East part of Scotland was by the Natives called *Cal Dun*.” (*OED*)
- (59) “1725 D. Defoe *New Voyage round World* i. 2 The Stories of their Engagements, when they have had any Scuffle either with Natives, or European Enemies.” (*OED*)

Smith’s tract (1631) is the only source to attest the use of *natives* as referring to the American Indians of Virginia. The word occurs in the pattern *natives of* + [NP], which reflects its quantitative salience in the *VJDA*. Interestingly, in the quotations the word *natives* oscillates between negative connotations (i.e. “suffering the Natives”, “scuffle either with Natives”) and neutral semantics (i.e. “inhabited by the Natives only”; “by the Natives called *Cal Dun*”), just as the Natives are represented ambivalently in the *VJDA*.

4. Conclusion

The corpus-assisted discourse analysis has revealed the semantic variation of lexical items referring to the American Indians in the period from 1584 to 1724 in the VJDA and has assessed it along the lines of pejoration and amelioration in relation to aspects of the historical and socio-cultural context of exploration and settlement. The results reflect the changing relationship which existed between English colonists and Native Americans over the decades and account for the ambivalent attitudes of the English authors in the representation of the Other. As the British Empire expanded, a similar tendency to overlexicalization is traceable in other new colonies in the rest of the world. Studies on 19th century travel journals, for example, document the usage of the same referents (Indian(s), Savage(s), Native(s), Inhabitant(s)) for labelling indigenous peoples in Australia and India (Shvanyukova 2020, Samson 2020). Interestingly, while the referents used by the male explorer to describe his encounter with the Australian aborigines remain emotionally neutral (Shvanyukova 2020), those used by Victorian female travellers for the natives of India (Samson 2020) echo the negative semantic prosody which I found in my data.

In light of the controversial role played by the Native Americans in the history of British colonization, the *OED* documents the overlexicalization which characterised the Early Modern English accounts of the Native Americans, through the attestation of *Indian(s)*, *Sa(l)voage(s)*, *Inhabitant(s)*, *Heathen(s)* and *Native(s)*. However, few of the quotations reported refer to the exploration, settlement and colonization of Virginia and North America (13%) and only 28% of the examples examined come from tracts and pamphlets written by explorers and future settlers travelling eastward and westward. In line with the *OED*'s traditional preference for the great works of literature, history and philosophy, the bulk of the quotations for the period under investigation (71%) come from literary sources (Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Defoe), philosophical and religious tracts (Bacon, Comber, Sanderson) and histories translated from foreign authors (de Mendoza, de Thévenot, Botero). By and large the definition of each word and the choice of the quotations reflect its general and specific meanings, its spelling variants and its most frequent lexico-syntactic patterns in the VJDA. However, some major semantic changes which affect the words in relation to the evolving relationship between the American Indians and the English settlers are not fully attested and the resulting semantic ambivalence of the terms is often not noted in favour of a one-dimensional representation of their usage. There

is also no clear evidence of the referential shift of the word *inhabitant(s)* and the referential ambiguity of *native(s)* in the context of the new generation of English colonists born in the occupied territories. Nonetheless, the choice of quotations for *natives* attests the ambivalent connotations of the word in line with the complex and ideologically-biased process of identity construction documented in the corpus.

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