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London calling from the auction world

A methodological journey through eighteenth-century London auction advertisements

Figure 1: James Christie, “The specious orator”, 1794

“Will your ladyship do me the honour to say £50,000? [. . .] An unheard of price for such a lot, surely.” The caption under the satirical cartoon by Robert Dighton of “the specious orator” James Christie (1794)¹ proves that while a picture says a thousand words, a caption speaks volumes. The orator is shown addressing a potential buyer outside of the picture as “your ladyship” and hints at the kind of audience that frequented Mr. Christie’s auctions. Such a fashionable lady might have spotted the auction announcement when perusing the newspaper while having tea served in fine china, comfortably seated in the sunlit parlor of her beautiful manor. Surrounded by an assortment of

luxury goods, she would fully engage in what has been termed the “empire of things” of the eighteenth century.² The caption illustrates how the auctioneer was trying to get her to name a specific price to move along the bidding process. Surely, it is not hard to imagine Mr. Christie’s

¹ “James Christie (‘The Specious Orator’)” (Website of the National Portrait Gallery), accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw17125/James-Christie-The-specious-orator>.

² Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

motivations. He probably hoped to fetch a good price for the fine wares he had put on display. That same day he might have announced the sale of “fine-toned old musical instruments”, “effects of a gentleman” or even a “well-known valuable collection of pictures” for that particular auction.³

Advertisers try to associate their products with dominant and popular societal themes. Today, producers and retailers use buzzwords like “sustainability”, “organic”, and “natural” to distinguish themselves from their competitors and to reach their target audience. It is difficult to ascertain which words or phrases from an auction announcement would have been most appealing to a woman of such elite status. Yet, this paper attempts to do so by digitally analyzing a large number of London auction advertisements from 1742–1829 and contextualizing the findings within contemporary dictionaries, furniture manuals, and philosophical treatises. In contemporary advertisements, many brands claim to make conscious efforts to reduce, re-use, and recycle because a growing number of consumers relates such efforts to an active environmental policy. My broader project’s scope is to investigate how eighteenth-century advertisers tried to sell their goods in London, which is traditionally considered a crucial time and place for the emergence of critical consumer transitions.⁴ Strange as it may seem, and despite an abundantly rich consumer historiography, we know little about why people bought certain goods. Hence, quite a few historians have attempted to research the underlying value systems, centering around evolving concepts such as “luxury”, “comfort”, “fashion”, “politeness”, “respectability”, and “novelty”.⁵

³ Daily advertiser, 11/10/1766; 20/01/1772; 07/10/1773, consulted through the Burney Collection, a Gale Cengage Learning database.

⁴ Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, 53.

⁵ Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing, 1550–1820* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 72–73.; Wouter Ryckbosch, “Early Modern Consumption History: Current Challenges and Future Perspectives,” *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 130, no. 1 (2015): 57–84, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9962>.

After the historiographical overview of eighteenth-century consumption cultures, the theoretical framework (convention theories) will be introduced and applied to auction advertisements. The proposed methodology that follows is twofold: a quantitative linguistic analysis (word embeddings) to identify central words and phrases, followed by a qualitative analysis where we take a closer look at these words and phrases. I will argue why word embeddings—however promising—alone are insufficient. Lastly, the analysis of how objects were offered for sale in household estate auctions will be compared between several sample periods as well as embedded in other eighteenth-century printed materials in the last section. The possibilities of word embeddings for the historical linguistic research have been demonstrated by Hamilton et al., who evaluated word embeddings against the known semantic changes of words like “gay”, “broadcast”, and “awful”.⁶ The preliminary results in this paper, regarding four sample periods throughout the majority of the “long” eighteenth century (c. 1730–1830), serve as a “proof of concept” for further research. Still, they already raise some critical questions regarding the eighteenth-century world of goods.⁷ The central hypothesis is that eighteenth-century newspaper auction advertisements give insight into the underlying value construction of the middling sort of people by revealing the shared mindsets of sellers and buyers. Implicit to this thesis, is the assumption that changes in material culture towards less durable but more fashionable—design based—goods increased the role value constructions in material culture, hence also the role of advertising.

⁶ William L. Hamilton, Jure Leskovec, and Dan Jurafsky, “Diachronic Word Embeddings Reveal Statistical Laws of Semantic Change,” *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1605.09096v6*, 2018.

⁷ John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Consuming the “long” eighteenth century

Historians and social scientists have written volumes about the British “consumer society” in the “long” eighteenth century. Significant progress has been made in describing shifting patterns of material culture ownership and acquisition.⁸ The importance of studying changing consumer values to better understand broader changes and evolutions have not gone unnoticed either. Woodruff Smith, for example, hypothesized about the significance of the shifting meaning of the concept “respectability” to understand the uses and popularity of coffee, tea, and tobacco. Similarly, Beverly Lemire saw the definitive breakthrough of cotton as an excellent example of the rising importance of “fashionability”. Maxine Berg, in turn, examined the role of “luxury” and “pleasure” in shaping the century while John Crowley built up a similar narrative around the dominant notion of “comfort”.⁹

Extensive research was based on probate inventories and sales catalogues in which, for example, the frequent occurrence of stoves became a synonym for “comfort”, and Indian calicoes signaled “fashionability”. Authors such as Carole Shammas focused on (semi-)durables in probate inventories and concluded that even contemporaries considered material culture changes to be worth mentioning.¹⁰ Probate inventories are rich sources in many ways, but due to their descriptive nature they provide very little information about the objects’ symbolic value. Devoid of adequate

⁸ Mark Overton et al., Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 9.

⁹ Woodruff D. Smith, Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800 (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).; Beverly Lemire, Fashion’s Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991); Maxine Berg, Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); John E. Crowley, The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities & Design in Early Modern Britain & Early America (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Carole Shammas, The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 76;95;188.

descriptors these valuable sources have essentially been approached in a numeric manner.¹¹ Instead this paper will exploit thousands of auction ads, and the vocabulary used therein to infer the underlying repertoires of evaluation of eighteenth-century well-off middle-class consumers.

It has also been argued that detailed discourse analyses of (travel) diaries, judicial proceedings, and political-economic tracts, and treatises about luxury provide insights into economic and moral discourses. Yet, authors such as Michael Kwass have pointed out contradictions in the works of philosopher Adam Smith, and it is clear that these sources by themselves relate more to consumption in theory rather than practice. Intellectual discussions by philosophers did not necessarily reflect their personal practices in everyday life, let alone how the better-off middling sorts—who form the lion’s share of the auction frequenters—went about their daily consumption.¹² The philosophical treatises that were examined by historians do talk about “luxury” and “comfort” but these concepts—as this paper will show—have little to do with actual consumption practices concerns as revealed by auction advertisements.

In this paper, to fill this research gap, the multiple and often subtle semantic shifts in referencing the quality of goods in auction advertisements are paramount. As will be demonstrated, these references are indispensable to expose and de-construct the way sellers implemented linguistic strategies to attract buyers. In order to fully understand these cultural motivations, we must analyze how consumers classified a broad range of products and how they assigned meaning

¹¹ Overton et al., *Production and Consumption*, 114–16.; Giorgio Riello, “Things Seen and Unseen: The Material Culture of Early Modern Inventories and Their Representation of Domestic Interiors,” in *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2013), 140.

¹² Michael Kwass, “Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Representations* 82, no. 1 (2003): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2003.82.1.87>.

and value to them.¹³ The buyers of the household goods offered for sale could be exceptionally diverse just because there was something for sale for each budget, from chamber pots to paintings from the Low Countries.¹⁴ This requires a more comprehensive mapping of value constructions among a much broader sampling of different—though still affluent—layers of society in eighteenth-century England. This needs to be done, moreover, across an even broader range of products. To this end, auction advertisements and the frequent references to object qualities found in advertisements for household estate auctions in eighteenth-century London are used.

England is a logical backdrop for this research. It has become generally accepted in historiography that England and especially London, preceded by the United Provinces, was the trailblazer of a new fast-paced consumption culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ This not only led to an explosion of philosophical treatises about the moral, social, and economic implications of consumption, but it also implied that London, and by extension England, was at the forefront of retail and taste innovations. Location shapes any study on consumption. London was not only a commercial capital; it also became a consumption hub; people travelled there with the purpose of spending money, earned elsewhere, on the goods and services that it offered.¹⁶ By focusing on one linguistic context, we can zoom in on the contextual and linguistic changes, namely what specific words were used to attract consumers and how did they evolve (or not?) throughout the century.

¹³ Jens Beckert and Christine Musselin, “Introduction,” in Constructing Quality: The Classification of Goods in Markets, ed. Jens Beckert and Christine Musselin (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁴ Cynthia Wall, “The English Auction: Narratives of Dismantlings,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 31, no. 1 (1997): 17.

¹⁵ Frank Trentmann, The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 53.

¹⁶ Joanne Sear and Ken Sneath, The Origins of the Consumer Revolution in England: From Brass Pots to Clocks (London: Routledge, 2020), 9.

Convention theories in advertisements

This paper is theoretically inspired by convention theories, which proceed from the assumption that any transaction between a buyer and a seller is contingent on their “agreement” on the quality (and hence price), which, in turn, is based on the use or the creation of a shared framework (a “convention”). These evaluation frameworks or value repertoires are extremely context specific and dependent on the knowledge of all actors involved.¹⁷ Not only the ruling conventions but also the meaning of value for both buyers and sellers could vary greatly since both are expressed in cultural as well as economic terms.¹⁸ Several authors, for instance, hypothesized about this shift from the intrinsic to the design value of material culture.¹⁹ This added to the stress about being knowledgeable about assessing quality was essential for all parties involved.²⁰ Due to the lack of universal quality labels, consumers had to use other tools at their disposal, including an awareness of the intrinsic raw material cost and value of things, as well as the fashioning thereof.²¹ According

¹⁷ Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *Les Économies de La Grandeur* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France et Centre d’Etude de l’Emploi, 1987), 74.; Rainer Diaz-Bone, “The Methodological Standpoint of the ‘Économie Des Conventions,’” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 47, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.43-63>.; Rainer Diaz-Bone and Robert Salais, “Economics of Convention and the History of Economies. Towards a Transdisciplinary Approach in Economic History,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 9, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.7-39>.

¹⁸ Bert De Munck and Dries Lyna, *Concepts of Value in European Material Culture, 1500–1900* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 1.

¹⁹ Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 185–86.; Bruno Blondé, “Tableware and Changing Consumer Patterns: Dynamics of Material Culture in Antwerp, 17th - 18th Centuries,” in *Majolica and Glass from Italy to Antwerp and beyond: The Transfer of Technology in the 16th - Early 17th Century*, ed. Johan Veeckman et al. (Antwerp: City of Antwerp, 2002), 300.; Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 146.

²⁰ Bruno Blondé and Ilja Van Damme, ‘Retail Growth and Consumer Changes in a Declining Urban Economy: Antwerp (1650–1750)’, *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 638–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.2009.00503.x>.

²¹ François Eymard-Duvernay, “Conventions de Qualité et Formes de Coordination,” *Revue Économique* 40, no. 2 (1989): 331;338-39.; Wouter Ryckbosch, “From Spice to Tea: On

to Helen Berry, this was partially the allure of shopping, assessing whether price fits, next to the excitement of evaluating the latest fashions, of course.²² Nancy Cox and Karin Dannehl have shown that retailers were very much aware of the fact that consumers were able to assess the quality and value of the products they chose to buy. Therefore, they included as detailed information in their advertisements as they could, as well as notions that emphasized their professionalism and reliability.²³

This entails being highly sensitive to the ways in which words express cultural and/or economic meaning, mostly because this was a partially subconscious process. In line with the convention theories, newspaper auction advertisements are a logical fit for a digital venture into consumers' socio-cultural motivations to buy certain products. They reached a broad readership—although still elitist—and are also conveniently structured into easily parsable units, which makes these sources exceptionally well suited for digital analysis. Above all, auction advertisements were the result of a process in which the strategies of sellers were gradually aligned to the cultural contexts and evaluation repertoires of the intended buyers. Unlike advertisements for specific (new) products, they are the only type of historical records where different objects are juxtaposed to allow comparison. Contrary to probate inventories and sales catalogues, with predefined orders of objects, objects in auction advertisements are placed next to each other and this is done in a carefully chosen order.

Consumer Choice and the Justification of Value in the Early Modern Low Countries,” Past & Present 242, no. 1 (2019): 37–78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty046>.

²² Helen Berry, “Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 12 (2002): 387, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S00804440102000154>.

²³ Nancy Cox and Karin Dannehl, Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 17–18.

Figure 2: Example of an auction advertisement in the Daily Advertiser, 7 January 1789²⁴

Considering the rigid scheme of advertisements, any changes in word placement or use were significant. The limited and pricey word real estate meant that advertisers had to make choices to make their advertisements as effective as possible by publishing what they thought would tempt readers the most.²⁵ Unlike advertisements for new products, it was not necessary to sacrifice any words to introduce the products themselves and the many advantages they might bring about. It is also important to note that secondhand goods were not considered inferior and thus in need of excessive praise. The objects, including wardrobes, chinaware, and bedding offered for sale, were already well-known to contemporaries. This allowed advertisers to focus on what set this specific object apart, ranging from the previous owner to material, design, and so on. It is precisely these values such as fashionability, comfort, usefulness...that give insight into the dominant societal themes or cultural categories. These advertisements were more than mere listings of commodities; regarding them as such would not give them the credit that they deserve. Stobart, Hann and Morgan

²⁴ "News." Daily Advertiser, 7 Jan. 1789. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000164215/BBCN?u=univantw&sid=BBN&id=b279ecef. Accessed 20 Nov. 2020.

²⁵ E.g., Dries Lyna, "The Cultural Construction of Value. Art Auctions in Antwerp & Brussels (1700–1795)," History (PhD Dissertation, Univ. of Antwerp, 2010), 139.

stress their importance and impact as virtual displays and claim that advertisements did not only state what was available but also hinted at a broader range of consumption possibilities.²⁶

In contrast to other types of advertisements, auction advertisements were and remained standardized records throughout the century; yet, it is exactly this feature that makes them an ideal source to study semantic changes over a long research period. This paper uses the Burney Collection and the British Newspaper Archive containing a wide selection of digitized newspapers throughout the entire century. The possibilities of such databases have been demonstrated in recent studies by, for example, Emma Hart and Maxine Berg.²⁷ The massive amount of data makes it both possible and feasible to analyze an extensive amount of auction advertisements, which will result in the uncovering of the underlying mental frameworks of eighteenth-century value constructions. Previous research has made clear that the link between advertisements written by salesmen and prevailing mental consumer frameworks is quite straight-forward, as auction advertisements were specifically written to engage consumers and convince them to attend the auction. Of course, this is why they are specifically suited to investigate changing value constructions and to uncover how consumption cultures manifested themselves.

Announcing auctions

Cynthia Wall paints the second half of the century as a crucial turning point for the professionalizing of the art of auctioneering. The shift to designated auction halls can be considered as one of the steppingstones in broader long-term retailing evolutions where fixed sales

²⁶ Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann, and Victoria Morgan, Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1680–1830 (London: Routledge, 2007), 173.

²⁷ E.g., Berg, Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain; Emma Hart, “A British Atlantic World of Advertising? Colonial American ‘For Sale’ Notices in Comparative Context,” American Periodicals 24, no. 2 (2014): 110–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/amp.2014.0014>.

locations gained a larger share in comparison to itinerant markets.²⁸ Samuel Baker (Sotheby's) and James Christie (Christie's) were key figures in honing the professional oral and textual strategies of auctioneers in respectively 1744 and 1766.²⁹ They experimented to find out what worked and what did not and successfully set the standard for London auctioneers. The language they used was not static. As salesmen, they knew very well that a successful advertising strategy required a polite approach of—and empathic connections with—consumers. Contemporary readers were considered to be more annoyed at reading puffy language, and it was unseemly to be impolite, unrespectful, and pushy. They instead opted to include so-called subtle messages where the writers appealed to readers' own judgements, knowledge, and passion.³⁰

This is not to say that no criticism or suspicion was voiced about the rising popularity of advertisements. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, advertisements were coined as “puffs” by Henry Fielding or associated with a “bubble”, which was a popular indicator at the time for things people were a little suspicious of. It is important to note that all eighteenth-century references and comments on the ethics of advertisers and their so-called false claims only pertain to advertisements of new products.³¹ Combining quantitative digital text analysis with a qualitative “close reading” of the auction advertisements and other contemporary documents such as dictionaries, furniture manuals, and scientific treatises will reveal the ways in which salesmen

²⁸ Ian Mitchell, Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700 to 1850: Narratives of Consumption (London: Routledge, 2014).

²⁹ Wall, “The English Auction,” 1;5.

³⁰ Claire Walsh, “The Advertising and Marketing of Consumer Goods in Eighteenth Century London,” in Advertising and the European City. Historical Perspectives, ed. Clemens Wischermann and Elliott Shore (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 83.; Cox and Dannehl, Perceptions of Retailing, 17–19.; Jon Stobart, “Selling (Through) Politeness: Advertising Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-Century England,” Cultural and Social History 5, no. 3 (2015): 324, <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800408X331416>.

³¹ Blanche Elliot, A History of English Advertising (London: Business Publications Limited, 1962), 45;109.

implemented shifting linguistic strategies to engage buyers.³² Furniture manuals, for example, eventually developed into proper sample books that allowed provincial customers to shop the latest London styles from the comfort of their home.³³

Auction advertisements from five newspapers are the backbone of this research. The Daily Advertiser and Morning Chronicle form both the basis of and the common thread throughout the sample periods, supplemented with newspapers selected based on availability and presence of auction advertisements through exploratory samples to obtain similar sample sizes.

	<u>Daily Advertiser</u>	<u>Morning Chronicle</u>	<u>Daily Post</u>	<u>London Daily Post & General Advertiser</u>	<u>Public Ledger & Daily Advertiser</u>	Total number of advertisement pages
SP1 1742– 1743	583	/	513	260*	/	1.356
SP2 1773	763	323	/	/	/	1.086
SP3 1799– 1800	630	778	/	/	/	1.408
SP4 1828– 1829	/	625	/	/	701	1.326

³² An extensive reading of the treatises and other contemporary literature falls beyond this paper's scope but will be an integral part of my further research.

³³ Jon Stobart, "Making an English Country House: Taste and Luxury in the Furnishing of Stoneleigh Abbey, 1763–1765," in About A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe, ed. Johanna Ilmakunnas and Jon Stobart (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 147.

Total number per newspaper	1.976	1.726	513	260	701	5.176
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*only 1743

Table 1: Overview of sampled newspapers and advertisement pages they contained for all sample periods

The Daily Advertiser ran from 1730 to 1800 and was one of the longest surviving dailies and consisted “wholly of Advertisements, together with the Prices of Stocks, course of Exchange, and Names, and Descriptions of Persons becoming Bankrupts”.³⁴ However, by 6 December 1731, about one-third of the first page was devoted to foreign and domestic news. This was one of the various tactics of the Advertiser to expand its readership. Its tactics also included printing lists of coffee houses where sellers could have their advertisements printed and distributed daily. As such, they reached buyers at notable places in London where the Advertiser’s readers gathered to conduct business, such as the Royal Exchange and the Bank of England.³⁵ According to Blanche Elliot, the Advertiser’s impact was groundbreaking to the level that the word “advertiser” was adopted by the majority of newspapers either in the title or secondary title until it lost all distinctive meaning.³⁶

³⁴ DA, 03/02/1730, consulted through Burney Collection

³⁵ "Daily Advertiser," Website of the Burney Collection, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/burney-collection>.

³⁶ Elliot, A History of English Advertising, 95.

It is essential to know that advertisements were the bread and butter of many newspapers and that a reasonable circulation was necessary to attract advertisements.³⁷ This led to a reciprocal relationship: a newspaper became more lucrative for advertising when more people read it, and more advertisements drew in more readers.³⁸ Advertising also drove the newspaper business in the sense that printers adapted column formats to accommodate the advertisers' latest designs.³⁹ Andrew Pettegree illustrates the power of advertisements on newspapers' developing process by pointing out that printers gradually reserved the whole front page for advertising, rather than placing the advertisements at the end.⁴⁰

What a "reasonable circulation" meant in the eighteenth century, however, remains a mystery as the records of the Stamp Office, which kept track of the mandatory stamp on each issue, no longer exist. The Morning Post editor claimed to sell about 5000 copies a day in 1778; it is plausible to assume that other advertisers would have sold a similar number of issues, even though dailies did not pass 1000 copies until the 1740s following the demand for news of the Jacobite Uprising.⁴¹ There was a constant fear of losing readers, and thus advertisements and the income they supplied when the actual news reporting would take a clear political turn. Nevertheless, the English press enjoyed a relative freedom that many newspapers on the continent could only dream of. This meant that in crucial political periods such as the French Revolution and the American

³⁷ Michael Harris, London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1987), 57.; James Raven, The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450–1850 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 265.

³⁸ Uriel Heyd, Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 84.

³⁹ Raven, The Business of Books, 268.

⁴⁰ Andrew Pettegree, The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 306.

⁴¹ Hannah Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 22–23.; Heyd, Reading Newspapers, 16.

War, newspapers tended to show their alliance in reaction to readers' expectations.⁴² London newspapers are the ideal testcase: they serve a vast local market, have many subscribers outside London and had a direct line to parliament's latest developments.⁴³ This does not mean that they saturated the entire provincial market as well, however. Ferdinand had shown that, even though London papers did initially provide the news for the provincial newspapers, the advertising columns and news pages became a place for local notices as well as for nationwide campaigns. Newspapers imported from the capital were expensive, and many booksellers—turned newspaper proprietors—saw an opportunity to sell under the price point of the available London papers and offer more affordable reading options than the expensive books they usually sold to their customers.⁴⁴

The cost of placing a “newspaper notice” was set at two shillings and sixpence and one shilling for an advertisement of “moderate length” after the 1712 Stamp Act, regardless of length. However, from the 1720s onwards, there were set notions of what was considered to be “moderate” length. Rules were not set in stone, however, because most printers kept making individual decisions. The price rose to two shillings in 1757, two shillings and sixpence in 1780 and even three shillings in 1789 because stamp duty only went down in 1836.⁴⁵ Standardization of advertisements lead to an increase in revenue, but not necessarily more legibility; the Advertiser

⁴² Charles John Sommerville, The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 120.; Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion, 46;181.

⁴³ Arthur der Weduwen and Andrew Pettegree, The Dutch Republic and the Birth of Modern Advertising (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 265.

⁴⁴ C.J. Ferdinand, “Newspapers and the Sale of Books in the Provinces,” in The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, ed. Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner, 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 434-35;439;445.

⁴⁵ Raven, The Business of Books, 265–66; 346–47.

had four pages with about 180 advertisements by the 1770s in an almost illegible, reduced font, as the examples below illustrate.⁴⁶

One of the notable auctioneers featuring prominently in the advertising pages is James Christie, one of the founding fathers regarding the professionalization process of auctioneering. He was well known to be a linguistic artist. The importance of rhetoric during auctions, as well as the central placing of his name in the advertisements and sales catalogues, were two of his major additions to auction practices. This was, in part, a reaction to the rising popularity of auctions.⁴⁷ Research by Hannah Barker has shown that readers of newspapers, and thus advertisements, were not just “the people”, i.e. the ruling—male—elite advertisements for and by servants offer proof for this.⁴⁸

To be Sold by AUCTION
 By **Mr. C O C K,**
On Tuesday and Wednesday next, the 7th and 8th instant.

THE HOUSHOLD FURNITURE,
PICTURES, PLATE, CHINA, and CURIOSITIES, of
WILLIAM POWLETT, Esq; decas'd; at his late Dwelling House
 in *Paradise-Row, Chelsea*; consisting of fine carv'd Mahogany and other
 Chairs; Marble and Mahogany Tables; Chimney-Glasses and Sconces, in
 gilt and other Frames; curious Manchineel Dressing-Tables, with Toilets
 complete; fine old Japan Desks, Cabinets, and Scrutores; two exceeding
 good Clocks by *Tompion*; a Harpsichord by *Player*; great Variety of Snuff-
 Boxes, in Gold, Silver, Agate, &c. also of Brilliant and other Rings;
 Silver and Copper Medals and Coins; a *Chamber-Horse* complete, and
 other Effects.

The said Goods will be exhibited to publick View on Friday next, and
 every Day after (Sunday excepted) till the Time of Sale, which will begin
 each Day at Half an Hour after Eleven.

Catalogues will be deliver'd gratis Tomorrow, at his late Dwelling House
 in *Paradise-Row, Chelsea, aforesaid*; and at *Mr. COCK's, in the Great
 Piazza, Covent-Garden.*

⁴⁶ James Tierney, “Periodicals and the Trade, 1695–1780,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner, 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 484.

⁴⁷ Wall, “The English Auction.”

⁴⁸ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 32–33.

Figure 3: Daily Advertiser, 1 June 1743⁴⁹

**SUPERB HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, LINEN,
CHINA, &c.**—By Mr. CHRISTIE,
At the Great Rooms, Dean-street, Soho, THIS and Five fol-
lowing Days, precisely at 12 o'clock.

ALL the Elegant HOUSEHOLD FURNI-
TURE, China, Prints, &c. the Effects of Captain WIL-
LIAM SUNDERLAND, gone to the West Indies, removed from
Bloomsbury-square.

Comprising large and superb four-post bedsteads, with gilt and
japanned cornices and window curtains to match, excellent goose
and down beds, field bedsteads and furnitures, and excellent
Bedding, beautiful Persia, Brussels, and Turkey pattern carpets,
sideboards with cellarets, sets of dining tables to join, secre-
taries and book-cases, double and single commodes, mahogany
wardrobes, dining, card and Pembroke tables, elegant lutes,
beautiful inlaid ladies' dressing tables, a table service of 150
pieces; tea and coffee equipages, a beautiful collection of prints
in burnished gold frames, a wardrobe of table and bed linen
a general assemblage of elegant furniture, well worth the attention
of those who want to furnish. May be viewed and Catalogues had.

N. B. Goods intended for the country immediately packed.

Figure 4: Morning Chronicle, 31 October 1796⁵⁰

If we take a closer look at some “typical” auction advertisements, a few things immediately catch the eye: no colors, font variations, and very similar wording even with fifty years between them.⁵¹ The title in the Daily Advertiser advertisements is about as far as stylistic experiments go in the researched period. It was a popular ornament that can be found at the preamble of many advertisements. The same few objects are always capitalized and/or put at the front: “household furniture, china, plate, linen . . .” This can be considered a stock phrase serving as a unique marker

⁴⁹ “News.” Daily Advertiser, June 1, 1743. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000148276/BBCN?u=univantw&sid=BBCN&xid=4675ecca>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2020.

⁵⁰ “Advertisements and Notices.” Morning Chronicle [1770], October 31, 1796. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000811455/BBCN?u=univantw&sid=BBCN&xid=aa3b1be0>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2020.

⁵¹ The advertisements were chosen by a randomizer and are representative in terms of content based on my extensive reading of the source material.

for this advertisement genre. The language used can be categorized as repetitive in the sense that fine (1743) and beautiful (1796) are mentioned several times in one advertisement. The auctioneer, time and location of the auction are always featured before listing the offered objects. The advertisements usually ended with practical information about the viewings, and where catalogues with more detailed information could be found. The professionalization of auction practices becomes apparent through the fact that the sale in 1743 took place in the deceased's house and the one in 1796 took place in the "Great Rooms" of Mr. Christie. However, the previous owner's address—who had moved to the "West Indies"—is mentioned so contemporaries could gauge the prestige of the goods offered for sale correctly.

The marketed goods and the manner in which they are described may vary, but on this anecdotal level, some changes become clear. In 1743, Mr. Cock praised his wares by focusing almost equally on the intrinsic value ("mahogany", "marble", "gold" . . .) as well as on the design value ("fine", "curious", "exceeding[ly] good" . . .). In 1796, contrarily, Mr. Christie focused mainly on the design value of the offered objects ("elegant", "excellent", "beautiful" . . .) and barely mentioned the elements of intrinsic value ("gilt", "mahogany", and "gold"). This may be partly due to the greater variety of objects; Mr. Christie talks about three different types of tables based on function ("dining", "card", and "Pembroke") while Mr. Cock mentions "marble" and "mahogany" tables. Nevertheless, the latter clearly considered the intrinsic value to be a more critical factor in selling the tables.

Methodology

This paper explores whether word embeddings, which have already yielded promising results in historical linguistic research, can be employed to gain insight into whether and how sales practices changed for goods and their description in auction advertisements.⁵² The proposed methodology consists of two parts: (A) a quantitative linguistic analysis to identify keywords that reveal the underlying mental frameworks related to the prevailing societal values is combined with (B) a qualitative analysis. Embedding the words by reading eighteenth-century dictionaries helps understand how contemporaries used and interpreted these words (i.e., semantic associations). Beyen has written that digital tools finally make the linguistic turn “linguistic” as they uncover differences—and not necessarily patterns as others have suggested—as long as they are combined with other hermeneutic methods.⁵³

(A) How objects are described in print gives insight into underlying consumer preferences and cultural models. By applying digital text analysis to auction advertisements, the role and semantic load of terms such as “old”, “great”, “fine”, “fashion”, and other “luxurious” terminology in material cultures become explicit. The idea that words used in similar contexts tend to have similar meanings (known as the distributional hypothesis) is key to embedding technologies. Intuitively, this idea makes sense: words like coffee and cup are not synonyms, but they are

⁵² E.g., Simon Hengchen, Ruben Ros, and Jani Marjanen, “A Data-Driven Approach to the Changing Vocabulary of the ‘nation’ in English, Dutch, Swedish and Finnish Newspapers, 1750–1950,” in *Proceedings of the Digital Humanities (DH) Conference 2019*, 2019.

⁵³ Marnix Beyen, “A Higher Form of Hermeneutics? The Digital Humanities in Political Historiography,” *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 128, no. 4 (2013): 164;166-67;169, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9349>.

related.⁵⁴ Distributional semantic models have confirmed that mostly “a word is characterized by the company it keeps”.⁵⁵ Recent research by Sara Budts has made this more tangible by stating that “a considerable share of our linguistic knowledge involves the intuitive feeling of which words fits where”. In other words, if people would be asked to complete the sentence “I like to drink tea from a ____”, they would likely answer with “cup” or “mug”. Syntactically a noun fits the sentence best, and semantically we know tea is usually not drunk from a plate.⁵⁶

In the eighteenth century, this would mean that, when we would look at advertisements that contain the word “mahogany”, we would expect to find it near an object that could be made from “mahogany” such as a “table”, “wardrobe”, or “desk”. If we would look at advertisements that contain the word “calicos”, however, we would expect to find neighboring words such as “Indian” and “printed”. Word embeddings visualize how many times “mahogany” actually appeared next to “table”, “wardrobe”, and “desk”. Since word embedding technologies are based on co-occurrence patterns, the choice of context is crucial: if the inspected context window is rather small, the analysis remains on a grammatical level. Logically, the accuracy of the results increases by restricting the researched vocabulary to the most frequent words. However, we can learn more from somewhat rare words that have meaning rather than common words like “in”, “the”, and “a”.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Yoav Goldberg and Omer Levy, “Word2vec Explained: Deriving Mikolov et al.’s Negative-Sampling Word-Embedding Method,” ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1402.3722v1, 2014, 5.; Hamilton, Leskovec, and Jurafsky, “Diachronic Word Embeddings,” 4.

⁵⁵ First theorized by Zellig S. Harris, “Co-Occurrence and Transformation in Linguistic Structure,” Language 33, no. 3 (1957): 283–340.; further developed by John Rupert Firth, Papers in Linguistics 1934–1951 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), 4.

⁵⁶ Sara Budts, “On Periphrastic Do and the Modal Auxiliaries. A Connectionist Approach to Language Change,” Linguistics (PhD Dissertation, Univ. of Antwerp, 2020), 92.

⁵⁷ E.g., Tomas Mikolov et al., “Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space,” ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1301.3781v3, 2013, 6.; Tomas Mikolov et al., “Distributed

For the following analysis, 5,176 pages were extracted with auction advertisements, ranging from one to 51 auction advertisements per page for the sample periods (1742–1743, 1773, 1799–1800, and 1828–1829) and from the newspapers as stated in Table 1—chosen based on the availability of the sources to generate equivalent models. The selected advertisements were converted into recognizable text with Transkribus, a tool for text recognition through which a model was trained for eighteenth-century printed English texts.⁵⁸ These results were then exported as plain text files, comprising over 9,600,000 tokens (640,000 of which unique). As argued before, such considerable samples form an ideal and representative basis for extracting word embeddings. Subsequently, I performed a targeted search for specific words throughout the researched period. The focus words have been chosen based on both the frequent and infrequent occurrence of specific words in each sample period because the most common words can be extracted from word embeddings in descending order.

By regarding each word as a list of numbers or vectors with vectors moving closer to each another as words (vectors) appear more often in close proximity by implementing word2vec from the Python Gensim library, the comparison becomes quite intuitive.⁵⁹ Gavin stated that vector-space models are ideal for interpreting every—historical—use of a term in a chosen corpus. Unanticipated connections between the vector (words) are to be expected because “words regularly violate grammar and common sense.”. This is especially the case when looking at words

Representations of Words and Phrases and Their Compositionality,” ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1310.4546, 2013, 6.

⁵⁸ For more information on the tool itself, consult the Transkribus website: “Home Page,” READCOOP, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://transkribus.eu/Transkribus/>; For more information about the possibilities, consult e.g., Annemieke Romein et al., “The Datafication of Early Modern Ordinances,” DH Benelux Journal 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20702>.

⁵⁹ Word2vec was chosen instead of FastText because—even though it tends to be more robust to spelling variations—the latter requires more data and offers fewer possibilities for comparison since word2vec remains the most widely used word embedding tool.

throughout history, as many of them go through a reduction of meaning amongst other processes as a language develops.⁶⁰ To make the data more objective, though, distance metrics are used. Distance metrics are established formulas from geometry used to calculate the distance between two vectors. One prevalent distance metric is the cosine distance. Using these metrics, the length of the vector or specific word does not matter, only the angle or relationship between the respective vectors. This makes comparing the words, and by extension, the models, straightforward.⁶¹ For each focus word, word2vec was used to create a model with the closest neighbors for each sample period. Subsequently, these models were aligned so they could be plotted and compared in the same graph.

The base model, which is used to plot the ten nearest neighbors in order to plot them only once and thus remain stable, is the most recent period, i.e., 1828–1829, because it contains the most extensive vocabulary. For plotting the graphs, I chose to analyze the 500 most frequent words in which eight semantic clusters were created for legibility. The number of semantic clusters is somewhat arbitrary and corresponds to the color bubbles used to divide the scatterplot into eight semantic fields and as a reading aid.⁶² Finally, I visualized the word embedding output via t-SNE scatterplots, which can be found below. These scatterplots (t-SNE) are a way of visualizing the multidimensional output word embeddings generate in 2D. I will elaborate on the implications of such a dimensional reduction in the next section. Combining the scatterplots for different sample

⁶⁰ Michael Gavin, “Vector Semantics, William Empson, and the Study of Ambiguity,” Critical Inquiry 44, no. 4 (2018): 660, <https://doi.org/10.1086/698174>.

⁶¹ Mikolov et al., “Efficient Estimation.”; Pierre Lison and Andrei Kutuzov, “Redefining Context Windows for Word Embedding Models: An Experimental Study,” in Proceedings of the 21st Nordic Conference of Computational Linguistics, 2017, 284–88.

⁶² I set the dimensions of the word embedding models at fifty and decided to plot ten of the nearest neighbors per era or sample period for comprehensibility because it makes the plots less crowded.

periods with tables of frequently occurring neighbors reveals shifts in word use and meaning. It is, for instance, plausible that base material or state-related terminology such as “silver”, “gilded”, or “for daily use” has had an apparent connection with specific objects.

(B) As mentioned, eighteenth-century England had a vibrant intellectual culture which led to the production and circulation of countless ‘intellectual’ works, ranging from philosophical treatises in the Enlightened tradition to more “hands-on” treatises about furniture material and building methods. The latter type is especially interesting because furniture and other household goods formed the majority of the objects offered for sale in auction advertisements. Clive Edwards argues that auctions were the ideal place for buying furniture as it allowed potential customers to see and appraise the goods in their context—as many sales took place in or at least mentioned the house of the deceased. Auctions also offered the opportunity to buy worthwhile goods in times when quality timber, especially outside urban areas, was relatively scarce.⁶³

The first quantitative phase of my research analysis will be enhanced by a thorough qualitative analysis and “close reading” to follow the footprints of pivotal words and phrases such as “fine”, “fashion”, “elegant”, and “genteel” in the eighteenth-century literary context. This combination of a close reading of the sources and discourse analysis of contextualizing documents reveals and explains inconsistencies brought about by digital analysis. One of the greatest strengths of word embedding technologies is their speed once the familiarization with contemporary documents is completed.⁶⁴ The number of sources processed and rendered into numerical results

⁶³ Clive Edwards, Turning Houses into Homes: A History of the Retailing and Consumption of Domestic Furnishings (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 73,142.; Stana Nenadic, “Middle Rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1720–1840,” Past & Present 145, no. 1 (1994): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/145.1.122>.

⁶⁴ Piotr Bojanowski et al., “Enriching Word Vectors with Subword Information,” ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1607.04606v2, 2017, 2, https://doi.org/10.1162/tac1_a_00051.

has one drawback, however, the need for an accurate framework and contextualization of the results.

I obtain the most comprehensive possible overview by sampling dictionaries from different years throughout the research period as well as by analyzing treatises by several philosophers, both male and female, and various furniture manuals—such as those of Chippendale and Hepplewhite. To demonstrate the benefits and drawbacks of this methodology within the paper’s limits, I have compared the Universal Etymological English Dictionary by Nathan Baily from 1730 and Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English language of 1768 for the lemmas “fine” and “excellent” below. I have also added a neighbor analysis of both the treatises and manuals to some of the focus words below for exemplary reasons.

Embedding the word embeddings

The findings presented in this paper demand further fine-tuning because however impressive and comprehensive word embeddings set out below might be, they are not precise enough to solve any particular historical puzzle. Word embeddings are crucial for first explorations of sources such as advertisements and newspapers, but they become much more revealing when combined with a close reading of contemporary literature.⁶⁵ Contextualizing the embeddings within the historiography and contemporary dictionaries is a useful first step but is not entirely satisfactory yet.

This is why I propose standardization through annotation in the open-access tool Recogito which will be exported in TEI-XML-format. Both the objects and their descriptors will be standardized in terms of spelling and relationship(s) between objects and their descriptors. These

⁶⁵ E.g., Hengchen, Ros, and Marjanen, “A Data-Driven Approach.”

links will be mapped in a directed manner from descriptor to object, and the beginning of each advertisement will be marked. This methodology will be cleaner, more structured, and allows for more precise extraction and analysis of patterns. A comprehensive sample will be selected to include advertisements from several newspapers, months, and years to train a model in order to recognize spelling and transcription variances throughout the entire corpus.

I will test the error margin of annotation according to the so-called annotator agreement principle described by Artstein and Poesio and recently applied by Wouter Haverals.⁶⁶ Fleiss' Kappa will be used to determine the reliability of agreement between a fixed number of annotators where a low Kappa indicates a low agreement and a Kappa greater than 0.90 is preferred. According to the annotator agreement principle, three components are necessary: a comprehensive manual, specific criteria for the annotators, and the independence of each annotator. I have drawn up such a manual based on a small but widespread sample of auction advertisements of each sample period. This will be used by 11 third-year undergraduate students who will annotate partially overlapping samples where each advertisement is edited by at least three annotators to allow for reproduction. Fleiss' Kappa will be applied at the letter level because words are not always correctly separated by Transkribus.

Standardization through annotation will form an ideal basis for a robust statistical approach to the corpus. As such, I will be able to get an overview of each object offered for sale and its respective descriptors for each advertisement. This will be generated for each sample period which, in turn, will allow me to trace insight into evolutions between these occurrences and relationships,

⁶⁶ Ron Artstein and Massimo Poesio, "Inter-Coder Agreement for Computational Linguistics," Computational Linguistics 34, no. 4 (2008): 555–96, <https://doi.org/10.1162/coli.07-034-R2>; Wouter Haverals, "De Maat van Het Middelnederlands: Een Digitaal Onderzoek Naar de Prosodische En Ritmische Kenmerken van Middelnederlandse Berijmde Literatuur," Literature (PhD Dissertation, Univ. of Antwerp, 2020), 140–58.

and relate these findings to empirically verify consumer historiography. It will also be possible to discern the word order within the auction advertisements and investigate which objects were listed and, more importantly, in which order they appeared. As was mentioned above, the word real estate was precious due to the growing length and standardization within the advertising field. An empirical mapping of words that were considered crucial to mention to the eighteenth-century consumer goes to the heart of the underlying value construction.

From fine chinaware to useful kitchen ware

The methodological outline may sound rather abstract; therefore, I have worked out some examples to visualize this approach's possibilities. Like many other tools, word embeddings generate a list of the most frequently occurring words. I used this list to assess the relative importance of the scatterplots' base words and to make the findings more tangible for the reader. To contextualize these scatterplots, I also retrieved a so-called neighbor analysis that reveals the words closest to the plotted word for both sample periods to explain the (lack of) shifts in tables.

Fine	1742– 1743	1773	1799–1800	1828–1829	Furniture manuals
	beautiful	beautiful	beautiful	finest	reduced
	luster	Fine toned	finest	choice	sufficient
	plate	bedtick	nankeens	beautiful	easily
	exquisite	rare	fine flavored	German	design
	lamp	port	bead	madeira	neatly

Table 2: Frequently occurring neighbors of “fine” in London auction advertisements 1742–1829
and furniture manuals 1755–1826⁶⁷

Table 2 clarifies that the word “fine”, next to its position as a popular descriptor, also remained quite stable throughout the researched periods with recurring surrounding words that shift slightly from “beautiful” over “fine toned”, and “fine flavored” to a more general “[fine] choice” the consumer ought to make as well as a very specific link to “madeira [wine]”. Another popular descriptor, “excellent” (Table 3), however, undergoes the opposite shift moving from food-oriented words such as “wine” and “port[o]” to state-related words of both the objects and the previous owners such as “elegant”, “perfect”, and “complete [set]”. “Fine” is shown as the fifth significant common word in the dataset and the second descriptor after “old” if we look at the relation to the objects themselves, closely followed by “excellent”, and “great” “good”. “mahogany”.

The popularity of “fine”, to the point that it was almost a filler word, probably contributed to the need for other more specialized descriptors such as “excellent” to truly emphasize the superiority and elegance of the goods offered for sale. This specialization and further classification of objects fits with the professionalization of auction practices as well as the growing need to make the value of goods more and more dependent on social conventions rather than their intrinsic value. Returning to the most common words in the dataset, we see that “bed”, “furniture”, “tables”, “chairs”, and “china” are the frontrunners among the described objects. Historiographical descriptive favorites to describe eighteenth-century consumer change, such as “fashion”, “luxury”, “pleasure”, and “comfort” are nowhere to be found among the 1,500 most common words used in

⁶⁷ A corpus of 7 manuals (280,009 tokens) was selected to assure a more professional classification of the offered goods and includes works by Chippendale, Sheraton, and Hepplewhite.

the auction advertisements, even though “fashion(able)” does pop up as a frequent neighbor of “useful” in the first two sample periods. This is quite easily explained by the fact that historians mainly use words related to each other’s work and to broader historiographical framings (Crowley, for instance, emphasizes ‘comfort’ to understand eighteenth-century consumer change, Berg emphasizes the word ‘luxury’ in her writings). In short: to describe consumer changes and evolutions, historians do not necessarily relate to the specific jargon and most commonly used words in eighteenth century commercial parlor.

Excellent	1742– 1743	1773	1799–1800	1828–1829	Furniture manuals
	wine	perfect	goods	superior	ancient
	Malaga	completely	incomplete	goods	genteel
	port	goods	perfect	elegant	distinction
	burgundy	assemblage	elegant	complete	novelty
	butt	style	complete	perfect	purposes

Table 3: Frequently occurring neighbors of “excellent” in London auction advertisements 1742–1829 and furniture manuals 1755–1826

To add the necessary perspective to this quantitative description, contextualization from dictionaries and other contemporary documents such as the furniture manuals is needed. Johnson (1768) elaborated more on the different meanings of a word such as “fine” than Baily (1730). However, the shift from “spruce, neat, gay, handsome [. . .]” to “[. . .] refined, pure [. . .] Nice; exquisite; delicate [. . .] Artful; dexterous [. . .] Elegant with elevation [. . .] Beautiful with dignity. 12. Accomplished; elegant of manners [. . .] Showy, splendid” shows clearly that our definition of “elegant” today is more related to “fine” in 1768. “Excellent” has more connotations to uniqueness such as “singular, rare” in 1730, and this remained the case in 1768: “1. Of great virtue; of great worth; of great dignity [. . .] 2. Eminent in any good quality”.⁶⁸ This explains the widespread use of “fine” and ties in perfectly with the preliminary results generated above. The repetitive language in auction advertisements mentioned above is why many of the recurring neighbors are more or less synonyms of the focus words. At this stage in the research, the hypothesis is that this widespread and consistent usage of “fine” is both a linguistic and economic marker.

When we consider the neighbor analysis within the furniture manuals, an interesting distinction comes to light. “Fine” is seemingly more used to describe the furniture’s aesthetic elements, while “excellent” seems to relate more to cultural categories or values the furniture may evoke with the user. For this analysis, only the introductory chapters are included which describe, amongst other things, the current styles and possibilities as well as the extended explanations that preceded plates such as the one that can be found in figure 5.

⁶⁸ Nathan Bailey, Dictionarium Britannicum, or, A More Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary than Any Extant (London: T. Cox, 1730), https://books.google.be/books?id=CoRZAAAACAAJ&hl=af&source=gbs_navlinks_s; Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language in Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals, Explained in Their Different Meanings (London: Dodsley, Robert, Longman, Thomas et al., 1768).

Figure 5: “Design for a bed” by Alice Hepplewhite⁶⁹

China	1742– 1743	1773	1799–1800	1828–1829
	useful	wearing apparel	useful	linen
	jewels	childbed	wardrobe	glass
	plate	table	firearms	plate
	japan	trinkets	stained	wearing apparel
	delft	jewels	paintings	jewelry

⁶⁹ Alice Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 1789, plate 95.

Table 4: Frequently occurring neighbors of “china” in London auction advertisements 1742–

1829

Figure 6: Scatterplot of “bed” in London auction advertisements 1742–1829

Bed	1742– 1743	1773	1799–1800	1828–1829
	blue	bedstead	sleeping	bedchamber
	settee	canopy	bedchambers	airy

	worsted damask	cotton	servants	sleeping
	silk damask	check	closets	spacious
	yellow	blue	bed hangings	dressing room

Table 5: Frequently occurring neighbors of “bed” in London auction advertisements 1742–1829

If we delve a little deeper into two of the most recurring object types, namely “china” and “bed”, we see a clearer shift with the semantic evolution of “bed” in both the scatterplot and table. It is no wonder that beds, kitchenware, linens, and other goods that retained their value were popular auction lots.⁷⁰ Table 4 shows a tiny shift for “china” where practical information about the state and origin of the porcelain gets pushed down in favor of other products such as “linen”, “glass”, and “plate”. It is not extraordinary that the combination initially stresses both the design as well as the state of the chinaware since its lifespan was much shorter than its metal or wooden predecessors. However, the apparent omnipresence of china is explained by the massive—one to two million items per year—import of ceramic pieces by the British East India Company, supplemented with English and continental (e.g., Delft) imitation.⁷¹ A close reading of the sources

⁷⁰ E.g., Ilja Van Damme and Reinoud Vemoesen, “Second-Hand Consumption as a Way of Life: Public Auctions in the Surroundings of Alost in the Late Eighteenth Century,” Continuity and Change 24, no. 2 (2009): 291, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0268416009007188>.

⁷¹ Anne McCants, “Porcelain for the Poor: The Material Culture of Tea and Coffee Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam,” in Early Modern Things. Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2013), 317–18.

clarifies that writing about the sale—and often even instigating the auction advertisement with this stock phrase—of a “valuable collection of stained glass, china” followed by other trinkets was commonplace by SP 2 (1773). It is not unthinkable that china had become such a well-known and loved object that it required little further explanation and was mentioned to reassure potential buyers that it was an auction with all the pomp and circumstance. It is noteworthy that “ornamental” does not appear on the top neighbor list, since displaying china on a mantel or in a glass cabinet is a well-attested (genteel) practice. Especially since table 6 reveals that “ornamental” often appeared in the same context as “useful”.

The description of “bed” (fig. 6 and table 5) throughout the sample periods seems to change much more based on the scatterplot. To recapitulate, these scatterplots are generated based on the aligned word2vec models that map targeted keyword’s neighbors. Only the relative (compared to other plotted words) distance to the focus words is significant; the colors mark the division into eight semantic fields and purely serve as visual aids. In order to make the data as legible as possible, however, a table of the most co-occurring neighbors per sample period has been added. It is important to note that the axes and indicated markers—and thus the direction and exact distance of the plotted words in relation to the focus words—on the scatterplots have no actual meaning because of the aforementioned dimension reduction (t-SNE). In other words, how far or near a plotted word is to a focus word is the only indicator of how frequently they co-occurred or not, no matter the direction or exact distance

However, a careful reading reveals that opposite changes to “china” occur on a fundamental level. Specific objects such as the type of bed (“settee” and “canopy”) and specifics about the bed hangings (“damask”, “cotton”, “blue”) were steadily disappearing in favor of information about the location of the bed in the house by the third and fourth sample period with

neighbors such as “bedchamber” as well as details about the room itself such as “airy” and “spacious”. On the one hand, it is no wonder that beds were such an omnipresent object as they were usually one of the most expensive objects within the house. They were often even given as dowries and considered as a symbol of marriage and domesticity.⁷² On the other hand, if we take a step back from the word embeddings through a frequency count and close reading, we see that auction advertisements shifted from simple lists of goods to descriptions of entire houses with their inventories up for sale which can account for possible distortions. The actual “beds” may no longer be the primary advertised word, having lost this position to “bedrooms” instead, or that the room was an important quality indicator and readers knew, for example, that the master bedroom would have the best bed of the house.

Such a clear, however incomplete, explanatory line cannot be drawn when dissecting the most occurring adjectives such as “old” and “good” as their scatterplots reveal little to no shifts, but the neighbor analysis once again sheds some light on the different and evolving nuances. In 1742–1743 “neat” is the closest overall word to “good” which fits with the observation made by Vigarello about the central role of cleanliness as a value.⁷³ When you take a look at dictionaries, “neat” was often used in the meaning of “fine” and referring to “fashion”. This was illustrated by Vickery, who described the emphasis in the portrayal of “neatness” of wallpaper.⁷⁴ The change of surrounding words such as “complete”, “perfect”, and the all-present “fine” can be explained by taking a closer look at the dictionaries. The narrowing meaning of “good” from a myriad of options, including “the essential perfection and integrity of a thing” and “that which physically

⁷² Van Damme and Vermoesen, “Second-Hand Consumption as a Way of Life,” 281;294.

⁷³ E.g., Georges Vigarello, Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 111.

⁷⁴ Amanda Vickery, Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2019), 177.

contributes to happiness” to exclude notions of perfections, probably meant that these perfections had to be made explicit.⁷⁵

Useful	1742–1743	1773	1799–1800	1828–1829	Philosophical treatises
	ornamental	ornamental	other	furnace	beneficial
	china	clean	numerous	radiator	pernicious
	stoves	tea sets	domestic	beading	essential
	firearms	carpets	culinary	clarifying	favorable
	kitchenware	stoves	various	property	pleasant

Table 6: Frequently occurring neighbors of “useful” in London auction advertisements 1742–1829 and philosophical treatises 1691–1812⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum*; Johnson, *A Dictionary*.

⁷⁶ A corpus of treatises (2,127,266 tokens) by 21 philosophers was selected based on content related to taste, beauty, luxury...Both prominent authors, such as Adam Smith and David Hume, as well as lesser quoted authors such as Mary Astell and John Baillie, were included.

The shifting appearance of “useful” (Table 6) went from anything to do with well-used objects such as “kitchenware”, “china”, and “stoves” to a specialized word for anything heating-related (“furnace”, “radiator”) as well as the general state of house (“property”). The occurrence in the first two sample periods is straightforward in the sense that the still usable state of less durable goods needed emphasis when they were offered on the second-hand market to prove their worth. Men’s clothing also appears high on the neighbor list. This might seem noteworthy but, as research from Amanda Vickery and Johanna Ilmakunnas has shown, despite popular beliefs and caricaturizing, men were quite impulsive shoppers, and their clothing was at least as luxurious as women’s fashions.⁷⁷ The seemingly odd semantic field characteristic to the third sample period (1799–1800) can simply be explained by the fact that “useful” is seldomly used. It outlived its convenience as a descriptor as it was reduced to something put at the end of the list: “and other useful articles”.

However, by the fourth sample period, “useful” was seemingly closely linked to heat sources that made the home comfortable.⁷⁸ The fact that “property” appears in the most frequent neighbors list is probably due to the growing practice of describing entire houses with their inventories and accompanying estate in auction advertisements. This gets particularly interesting when we take a look at the neighbor analysis within the philosophical treatises; it is clear that “useful” was a convenient word for the intellectual elite to express ways to better oneself and give

⁷⁷ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 128.; Johanna Ilmakunnas, “French Fashions: Aspects of Elite Lifestyle in Eighteenth-Century Sweden,” in *About A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Johanna Ilmakunnas and Jon Stobart (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 246.

⁷⁸ Wout Saelens, “The Comforts of Energy? Consumer Culture and Energy Transition in Eighteenth-Century Gent and Leiden (1650–1850)” *History* (PhD Dissertation, Univ. of Antwerp/ Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2021).

advice. This included “useful for the purposes of human life”, “useful to suggest to the reader” and “is not a fault to have Passions, since they are natural and unavoidable, and useful too”.

These preliminary analyses already show intriguing additions to previous studies, such as the centrality of “fine” in commercial jargon, and as such demonstrate the usefulness of research based on word embeddings and close reading to gain insight into the alleged core values of eighteenth-century consumers. In order to truly explore these rich sources to their fullest extent, however, an in-depth investigation that brings it back the word and object level is needed to interpret the data before they are analyzed by using computational methods. According to Catherine Coleman, this need for a comparative methodological approach explains why many humanities scholars, specifically historians, are still reluctant to embrace digital methods. The emphasis tends to be on developing digital models, which are seemingly hard to unite with a research discipline that considers interpretation one of the most essential methods. She proposes solving this conundrum by looking at historical datasets from as many perspectives as possible because of their multidimensional nature.⁷⁹

Conclusion

This experiment, first and foremost, demonstrates the necessity of combining digital analyses with more fine-tuned textual analyses. It pleads in favor of using control groups from both eighteenth-century press and broader literature to contextualize and exclude semantic shifts as solely specific to auction advertisements or broader press evolutions. With this caveat in mind, the buzzwords in

⁷⁹ Catherine Nicole Coleman, “Seeking the Eye of History: The Design of Digital Tools for Enlightenment Studies,” in Digitizing Enlightenment: Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Studies (Oxford: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2020), 221–22; 243.

advertisements are a reflection of what was thought to appeal to the English elites and better-off middling sorts of people. The fact that words commonly used by historians to describe eighteenth-century consumer changes, such as “pleasure” and “luxury”, did not occur frequently and remained quite unstable in the sample periods demands further exploration. An in-depth analysis of these words’ meaning in dictionaries and treatises is needed to embed the language used in auction advertisements within a broader spectrum of language use. For instance, “fine” apparently did not have any associations with what were thought to be leading design values, namely “novelty”, “fashionability”, “luxury” . . . On the one hand, historians do not necessarily use the language of the period they are describing but usually opt for unambiguous terminology. On the other hand, words such as “fine” – or what we would nowadays refer to as elegant – were consistent and widely used in the eighteenth century. Of course, these types of words became increasingly narrow in meaning to the point that “fine” now has become a synonym of “exquisite”. This example certainly hints at the key importance of the design and aesthetic value of a product which—up to a certain level—ties in with the historiography. Yet, the use of “fine” cannot be earmarked as a feature of the “new luxury” model only, as it refers to taste and the reproduction of social inequalities through ownership and consumption. Moreover, it implies that certain core values were permanent features, even in a fast-paced consumption era such as the long eighteenth century.

While James Christie might have come across as a crafty businessman trying to lure “[her] ladyship” into buying his fine goods, he and, by extension, all auctioneers were pivotal figures in the way language was used to describe the world of goods. Many of these shifts can be attested to the professionalization of auction practices that were, in turn, a reaction to an explosion of object classification that made previously coveted but out of reach objects more affordable for more—yet still elitist—groups of people. This, of course, ties in with broader changes in eighteenth-

century retailing that combined so-called traditional early modern features such as an emphasis on durability and propriety as well as features that focused on the aesthetic qualities of objects. In that light, it is especially striking that the ornamental function “china” was seldomly made explicit within the advertisements.

Next to that, it is essential to consider the fact that languages are living organisms that develop through time, and the well affirmed reduction of meaning fits in perfectly with the more specialized language that the auctioneers needed to describe and praise their wares. By avoiding flashy or over-the-top language, they affirmed their own professionalism and emphasized the value of their goods in a realistic way. In conclusion, this preliminary methodological exploration attests that the bundle of values that ran the show is much wider, and specially more stable, than what is generally assumed. Auctioneers seem to be more creative and practical in their wording than eighteenth-century and present-day intellectual luxury debates presumed.