How to Do Things with Things: A Corpus-Stylistics Approach to Objects in Modernist Fiction

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Summary

In my research project, I want to stress the interactive aspect of texts and investigate what readers “do with things” while reading. I propose a literary-linguistic discourse perspective on the textual representation of objects and readers’ comprehension processes. I will employ digital tools to explore objects as narrative and linguistic strategy in modernist texts using frequency data from corpora.

Framework I

Focusing on linguistic patterns in noun phrases, I hope to find quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a (hypothetical) model for reading objects in modernist fiction. In my analysis, I will focus on frequent lexical choices and patterns, i.e. syntactic argument structure, lexicosemantic aspects and patterns of transitivity. These include aspects such as lexical priming, semantic prosody and topic modelling.

Framework II

With a detection of textual patterns I hope to be able to explain further the “psycho-poetic effects” (Mellmann 2010) of reading, such as ontological categories of narrative character and voice, narrative space and the inference of coherence (plot). I want to provide a fine-grained analysis of linguistic choices in order to provide an “exploration and testing of literary hypotheses” through mining of narrative [and linguistic] structure from corpora” (Mani 2013).

Data and Tools

- a POS-tagged corpus of 30 long and short modernist texts
- a reference corpus of fictional texts bordering on modernism
- a second reference corpus containing non-fictional texts (ARCHER, BNC)

Zooming in on: Fictional Characters at the Syntax-Semantics Interface

Summary

- How do fictional texts invite readers to imagine a fictional figure? How do readers tap into this “emotional trap”? What are reasons for Mellmann’s claim that “it is not character but focalization [that] guides our fictional experience” (416)?
- A corpus stylistics analysis of lexis and syntax will help to shed light on textual and narrative strategies.
- In modernist texts, description is frequently decoupled from a clear deictic centre, i.e. the reference is not clear. In many of these instances semantic objects as heads of the noun phrase can be identified instead.
- Carve out the significance of two different modes of writing fictional figures: a mode of explicit reference and a mode of implicit induction. It may also further account for the perceived difficulty of modernism’s experiments of representing consciousness.

How to Retrieve Data?

- How to provide numbers for a key aspect of fictional texts? The aim is to provide exact numbers of explicit and implicit modes of character creation.
- Fictional figures are introduced to stories by:
  - referential expressions such as proper names, definite descriptions (i.e. as appositions or adjective-noun patterns) or personal pronouns.
- Machines have learned to automatically retrieve references to names (NER) and parts of speech (POS-tagging).
- The automatic retrieval of description is a much more complex task for the machine, especially when phrases appear to be “synsemantic” as is often the case in modernism.
- Focus on characterizing effects of lexical choice and placement in syntax (e.g. as head in noun phrase).
- How to operationalize?
  - Use Wmatrix to analyze corpus semantically and to retrieve numbers and instances of objects. Zoom into phrase and compare numbers.