

# 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

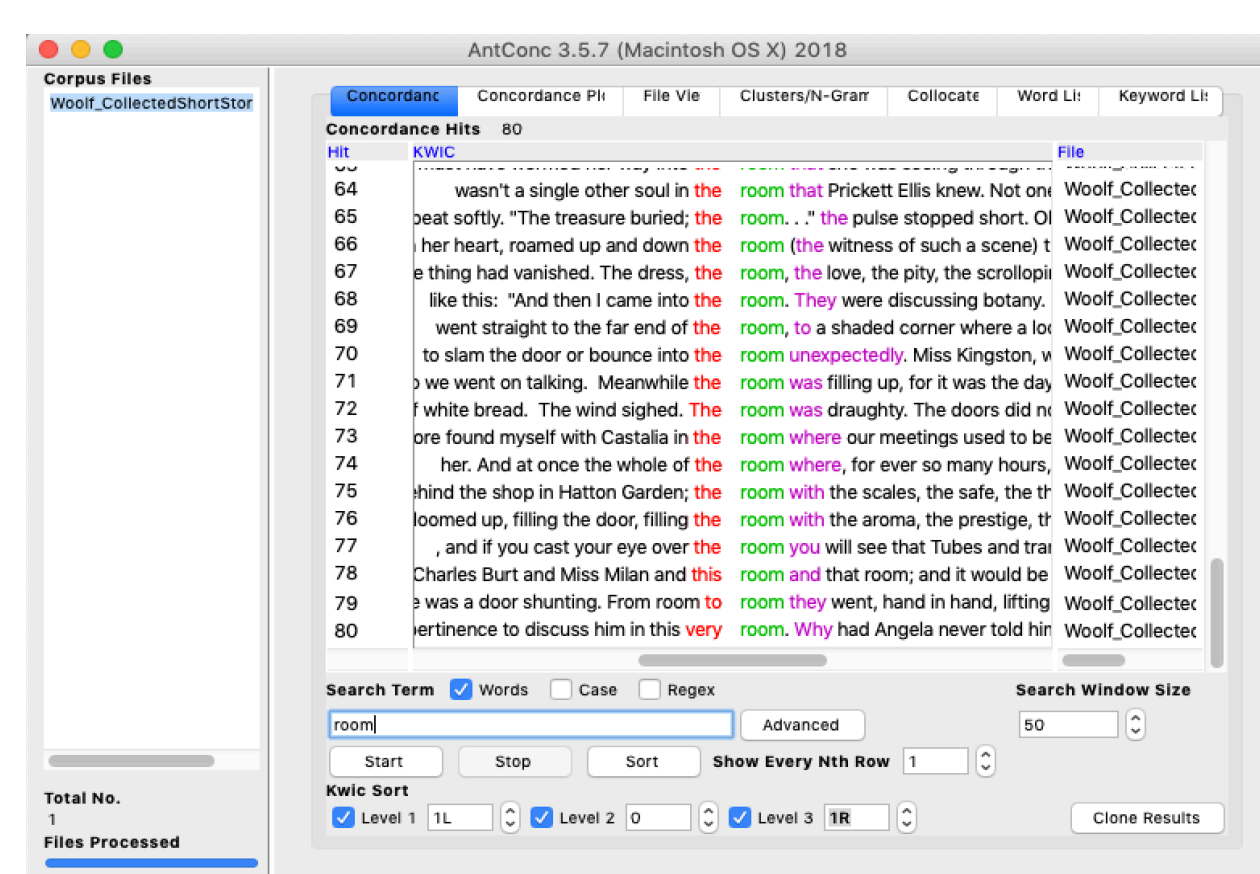
Focusing on linguistic patterns in **noun phrases**, I hope to find quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a (hypothetical) model for reading objects in modernist fiction. In my analysis, I will focus on **frequent lexical choices and patterns**, i.e. syntactic argument structure, lexico-semantic 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)



AntConc (Anthony 2018)



Wmatrix (Rayson 2009)

## 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.