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Re-defining Subtext as Logical Form

The corpus-assisted recovery of subtext lies at the centre of the debate on natural language philosophy and logical form (Wittgenstein, 1922: 7; Russell, 1956: 197; Carnap, 1928). Russell notes that it is possible, crudely, for natural language to mimic logic: '…it is a language that has only syntax and no vocabulary whatsoever' (Pears, 1972: 24). But if this were done, the question would remain concerning the extent to which the full words in ordinary text might be replaced by words, on a cline, that are apparently full upon inspection, but still in the nature of sub-technical terms (Sinclair, 2004: 97), and behave like grammar words. Wittgenstein (1929) declares, uncharacteristically, that this task is difficult. However, his language singles him out (with the notable exception of Malinowski) as the first corpus linguist. He even offers a method involving the use of wildcard searches without knowing that the term 'wildcard' would only be invented 30 years later. Hence, the procedure and the terms recovered by it using Russell's technique can today take the form of wildcard searches for full words as quasi-propositional variables. For example, Yeats's line: 'That is no country for old men' gives rise to a search line of the form: 'that+is+no+*+for+*'. Our candidates for the variables represented by the first wildcard turn out to be (from a large reference corpus), REASON and EXCUSE. As they are the variables with the highest frequency, it is correctly hypothesized that their function will be strongly akin to that of grammar words. If we apply them to the poem from which they come, 'Sailing to Byzantium', we not only discover that they falsify the persona's actions in the poem, but act as a contextually prosodic argument: a logical semantic prosody that is co-extensive with the text's literary world.

This discovery complements and further systematizes semantic prosodies recovered earlier, confirming that they were never simply part of metaphysics. These techniques will begin to create pressure for the use of collocation to re-organise the dogmas of empiricism and in so doing, improve the quality and accessibility of corpus empiricism (McGinn, 1981: 89). The removal from the Third Dogma of the conceptual scheme by which the given is interpreted will have profound implications for the science of and hence the future of cognitive approaches. This would favour the analysis by discourse communities of the textual duress from which Teubert (2010: 259) foresees no escape. Pessimism must give way to those forms of emancipation (Marx, 1992) already secured by instrumentation for language based on collocation which Firth (1957: 196) referred to as '…not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words.'

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