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Discourse and social issues: Changes in the lexis of British social work

The process of industrialisation and technological innovation brought about changes in many western societies. However, advantages deriving from any kind of development and improvement may be accompanied by a series of negative consequences and, for example, result in social terms in disparities. For this and several other reasons countries usually provide services whose aims are to support the population and their needs. Social workers, for example, are professionals whose profile has been designed to work in social services organisations in order to intervene and mediate in various social contexts and help individuals, families or communities. Social work profession has been evolving: changes in the organisation of activities as well as interdisciplinary approaches have been necessary to make social work a highly specialised job, a profession with bibliographic references including theoretical background and practical applications, and an effective tool to support governmental institutions in the attempt to solve social problems.

A previous study revealed that the field of social work has undergone a process of specialisation since the 1970s, thus reflecting and responding changes in the social condition. The corpus represented by the issues of the British Journal of Social Work (henceforth CBJSW) dating from 1970 to 2008 constituted the source of investigation. The analysis of the data showed that one of the key terms, i.e.: <I>care</I>, has changed in frequency and use. Initially more frequently occurring as a noun accompanied by premodifying items, <I>care</I> has recently become highly productive as a premodifier. This is an example, but further investigation would help draw valid and meaningful conclusions about the way the discourse of social matters is represented by lexis and detecting the changes it has undergone.

This paper aims at providing other examples through the analysis of some items / patterns that have been found exploring the CBJSW corpus. The corpus has been updated and now includes texts appearing in the issues of the years 2009 and 2010 for a total of 4.5 million words. The data considered for present purposes refers to the last ten years, i.e. 2000 to 2010. The use of computer tools performing different tasks, namely the production of wordlists, concordances and key words, were used in order to retrieve the data from the corpus and provide contexts of occurrence. At the same time, some statistical data will be processed in order to show the kind of trend the items found have followed in the lapse of time considered.

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