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A methodological fusion: Problems combining CDA with corpus linguistics

Analyses using corpus linguistics tools, such as concordance analysis, collocation clouds, and frequency counts, tend not to focus on wider social factors involved in text construction. In this paper I consider how models of discourse analysis, specifically the model of Critical Discourse Analysis proposed by Fairclough (1995), can be combined with corpus linguistics in order to do both textual and social analyses of texts. Arguably, the main advantage of using corpus linguistics with CDA is that the resulting method will combine quantitative data (usually associated with corpus linguistics) with qualitative data (usually linked to discourse analysis). Indeed, Mautner describes the combination of these two methods of analysis as “a ‘best-of-both-worlds’ scenario hardly achievable through the use of purely qualitative... analysis” (2009:125).

However, this combination of methods is problematic. In this paper I use Fairclough’s tri-level framework to show that, if one begins from a CDA perspective and attempts to map corpus tools onto the already existing model, the resulting analysis becomes highly complex and specialised to the text type(s) analysed. Using an example involving the analysis of third-person pronouns, I illustrate how each level in Fairclough’s model (textual, discursive, and sociocultural) must be tailored to the specific data in the corpus, meaning that what was originally a relatively neat and highly structured model of CDA becomes unsuitable as a general model of analysis.

On the contrary, I argue that if one begins from a corpus linguistics perspective and uses the model of analysis proposed by Mautner (2007) then it is possible to combine both corpus and discourse analysis into a generic model which can be applied across text types. Mautner’s method combines both quantitative and qualitative data in order to show how corpus analysis can be well informed by a sharper focus on discourse. Thus, having presented the two models of combined corpus and discourse analysis, I conclude that movement back and forwards between quantitative (corpus) and qualitative (corpus and discourse) analysis, as proposed by Mautner, and Harwood (2006), is an effective way of tackling discourse using tools primarily associated with corpus linguistics.

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