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Why Hermione is not the Hero: Using Corpus Methods to Analyse the Discoursal Representation of Female Physicality in Children's Literature

Children's literature has frequently been analysed in terms of the representation of female characters, typically comparing them quantitatively with the male characters in terms of their relative frequency, centrality and occupation (cf. Diekman and Murnen (2004), Evans and Davies (2000), Gooden and Gooden (2001), Kortenhuis and Demarest (1993), Wharton (2005)). More recent studies have harnessed corpus methods, notably Knowles & Malmkjaer (1996) and Thompson and Sealey (2007) who used concordancers to explore corpora of children's literature with a view to a more ideological analysis. Although the philosophical underpinnings may vary, research into children's literature is based on the assumption that it is important in the developing identities of the readers, being "inevitably suffused with ideology" (ibid. 3), and has consistently shown the representation of characters to be strongly gendered (Wharton 2005).

In this paper I will report on my research into the discursive construction of physical femininity and masculinity in the Harry Potter series, via an analysis of body parts, and explicitly combining corpus methods with a critical discourse approach. Jeffries (2007) and Motschenbacher (2009) provide useful analyses of the representation of adult female body parts in magazines, both concluding that they are linked to dominant gender discourses. Baker (2006, 2008), Baker et al. (2008) and Mautner (2009, 2009a) demonstrate the advantages of the synergistic relationship between corpus linguistics and the critical analysis of discourse, notably that the use of corpus linguistics as a data collection method counters charges of "cherry-picking" frequently levelled against CDA. Based on a corpus-CDA analysis of three of the Harry Potter novels, I will show that the concept of discourse prosody is particularly helpful in revealing how the use of body parts by characters to express emotion and act agentively on the world is gendered in the series, with female characters being far more likely to be associated with emotion, and even being rendered unable to act on the physical world as a result of overwhelming emotion. The females' interaction with other characters and objects in the world, and, in particular, their response to danger, suggest stereotyped discourses of inequality which see women and girls as requiring protection and being physically incapable. Thus gender is still a particularly salient aspect in this widely-read example of modern children's literature, despite plots which appear to be fairly positive towards women. The strength of a corpus approach in this study lies in its capacity to reveal objective, and often otherwise fairly covert, trends in language use which enrich the analysis of discourses in these influential texts.

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