Just what is corpus stylistics?

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Over a relatively short period of time, corpus linguistic methods have been embraced by a wide range of sub-disciplines of linguistics (and, more recently, by other disciplines entirely). Corpus linguistics has had a transformative effect on such areas as historical linguistics, child language acquisition and critical discourse analysis, to name but a few. In stylistics, corpus methods are increasingly being adopted, not least because of the influential work of corpus linguists such as Stubbs (2005) and Mahlberg (2013). Indeed, such is the popularity of the corpus approach in stylistics that it is now common to see the term corpus stylistics used to describe any stylistic work that utilises corpus methods. This adoption of corpus as a premodifier to designate a particular type of stylistics is unusual when compared against the practices of other sub-disciplines that use corpus methods. So just what is corpus stylistics and how, if at all, does it differ from corpus linguistics? My talk aims to offer answers to these questions by exploring how stylisticians have used corpora in their work. I begin with an overview of research in corpus stylistics before going on to consider issues with the presuppositions inherent in some definitions of the term. I then discuss topics in stylistics that have benefitted particularly from corpus methods. These include the analysis of speech and thought presentation (e.g. Semino et al., 1997, Semino & Short, 2004), where corpora have enabled the discovery of quantitative as well as semantic norms. Following this, I consider the washback effects that corpus linguistics has had on methodological practices in stylistics. I illustrate some of these by introducing a software tool called Worldbuilder, developed by linguists and computer scientists at the University of Huddersfield to provide a means of improving the systematicity of cognitive stylistic analyses that utilise Text World Theory (Werth, 1999). I suggest that the incorporation of basic principles from corpus linguistics such as data sampling and annotation are improving methodological and analytical practice in stylistics. Finally, having outlined the impact of corpus linguistics on stylistics, I consider what stylistics has to offer to corpus linguistics. I suggest that foregrounding theory, arguably the cornerstone of stylistics, offers valuable analytical insight when connected to notions of statistical salience.

References

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