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A Corpus-based Linguistic Study of Contemporary Feminist Short-Story Writers: with Special Reference to Alice Munro

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Abstract

This dissertation is a corpus-based study of the **linguistic features** in some selected short stories of the contemporary female Canadian feminist writer Alice Munro (1931-till present). These linguistic features are categorized into lexical and grammatical. The aim of the study is to analyze recurrent themes related to the deteriorated conditions of women throughout the twentieth century. The **lexical analysis** is carried out focusing on collocations, concordances of lexical items, patterns, and lexical sets that are frequently used to convey such themes, in addition to the denotations and connotations of the most and the least frequent lexical items with various lexical features. Besides, the **grammatical analysis** of the selected stories is based on Hallidayan Textual, Interpersonal, and Experiential Metafunctions. It focuses on modality system, transitivity system, and process types, in addition to cohesion. Throughout the analysis, special attention is devoted to how these linguistic levels help portraying the feminine identity adopted by Alice Munro and prevailing in most of her writings. This is processed using AntConc 3.4.4. Software and TAACO 1.5.2. Software.

Key words: *Lexical Features, Denotation, Connotation, Systemic Functional Grammar, Interpersonal Metafunction, Experiential Metafunction, Textual Metafunction, Corpus Analysis, Feminism.*

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List of abbreviations:

SFG: Systemic Functional Grammar

KWIC: Keyword in context

CL: Corpus Linguistics

CCL: Critical Corpus Linguistics

TAACO: Tools of Automatic Analysis of Cohesion

TTR: Type Token Ratio

Sb: Somebody

Sth: Something

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Introduction

0.1. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of this dissertation are:

- 1- To uncover the strategies adopted by the feminist writer Alice Munro concerning her lexical and grammatical choices.
- 2- To show the importance of economy in style that a short story writer must stick to, to reveal his/her views as the short form requires economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complex plot. That is why every word counts.
- 3- As a Noble Prize winner for her literary production, Alice Munro can be considered a representative of feminist short story writers. Thus, investigating the characteristics and features of her style means investigating the distinctive features of feminists in general.
- 4- To show to what extent most of Alice Munro's female characters are very passive, through the analysis of her grammatical and lexical choices, since she uses to focus on the weak points concerning female position.

0.2. Significance of the Study:

The study attempts a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the collected data in terms of form and function. Data is examined quantitatively by using AntConc 3.4.4 Software to determine the most and the least frequent lexical and grammatical items, and

TAACO 1.5.2. Software to detect the cohesion. Afterwards, qualitative analysis is achieved by drawing significant interpretations of the frequency of these items. The main framework in this study is the Lexical Theory of the Firthian school of Linguistics, and Halliday and Matthiessen's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) (2014).

0.3. Statement of the Problem:

Short story is a brief kind of narration that is shorter than a novel, and that usually deals with only a few characters. A short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. This requires economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complex plot. Few characters are disclosed in action and dramatic encounter, but are seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a “complete” or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject. This requires an accurate writer to be able to send all his/her messages through this short form in which every lexical or grammatical choice counts.

Hence, testing the feminist views through short form and economy of language is quite problematic, as it demands analyzing the writer's different choices, such as lexical items and grammatical categories, and pointing out to what extent they are efficient in revealing her views.

0.4. Research Hypotheses:

The research hypothesizes that

1- The interpersonal, experiential, and textual metafunctions are very effective in reflecting the feminist themes.

2- Lexical analysis of the collocations and the most and the least frequent lexical items and their keyness values of Alice Munro's short stories, together with testing their connotations and denotations, show that short story writers stick to certain style in their lexical choices and that these choices must serve their themes.

0.5. Research Questions:

This thesis is an attempt to find answers to the following questions:

1- To what extent are the tools of Systemic Functional Grammar frequent in the genre of short stories represented in Munro's short stories? i.e To what extent is Munro, as a short story writer, efficient in using tools of SFG to represent her themes and views clearly?

2- What are the common lexical distinctive features that appear in Munro's lexical choices, and can be generalized to all feminist short story writers?

3- What are the dominating connotations and denotations of the lexical items that Munro adopts, and can be considered common to other feminists?

4-What are the various grammatical features that characterize short stories in general? And what are the characteristics of feminist literary works in particular?

0.6. Data Sources:

The main corpus of the study contains 13 collections written by Munro including 143 short stories. The total number of the words of these short stories tentatively exceeds one million and two hundred thousand. (See appendix 1). Besides, the study selects 10 collections of male short story writers to act as the reference corpus and to provide the keyness value generated through the computer software. (See appendix 2)

0.7. Theoretical Framework:

7.1. Corpus Linguistics:

Corpus Linguistics, as an important area of Computational Linguistics (CL), provides large quantities of language databases accumulated in a systematic manner from various fields of actual language use following some statistical methods and techniques of data sampling. Furthermore, it provides some sophisticated devices to analyze these corpora to extract linguistic data, examples, and information necessary in applied linguistics, applying this data and information in various fields of human knowledge.

7.1.1. AntConc (3.4.4) Software:

AntConc is a freeware multi-purpose corpus analysis toolkit. It includes word lists and keyword frequency generators, a powerful concordancer, in addition to various tools for lexical bundle analysis, and a word distribution plot.

AntConc contains seven tools which are:

- 1- Concordance Tool
- 2- Concordance Plot Tool:
- 3- File View Tool
- 4- Clusters/ N-Grams:
- 5- Collocates:
- 6- Word List
- 7- Keyword List

This software is freely downloaded from the following website

<http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/AntConc/releases/AntConc344/help.pdf>

7.1.2. TAACO (1.5.2) Software

TAACO is a tool of automatic analysis testing cohesion. It performs this through testing repetition of every single part of speech. Furthermore, it investigates repetition through overlap between sentences and between paragraphs.

This software is freely downloaded from

7.2. Lexical and Grammatical Analysis:

Lexical analysis accounts for meanings of words and their collocations. Hence, it is used as an accurate method for analyzing the meanings of words used in literary works. The main aim is to test the accuracy of its lexical choices to arrive at certain themes. This happens when the words are analyzed and described in terms of being lexical sets, in addition to the idea of sense relations and different types of meanings such as the denotative and connotative ones.

7.2.1. Sense Relations:

There are many relations that are repeated across pairs and sets of words. Actually, many words have different meanings, and each meaning covers a very limited area of the original word. Furthermore, it is not only important to identify the semantic features of the word, but it is also important to find out the relations between these words, as it is very important to understand the meaning to be able to reach the distinctive features of specific writer. There are many relations that are repeated across pairs and sets of words, and are discussed later on in detail. These relations are:

- 1- Synonymy
- 2- Antonymy
- 3- Hyponymy (Inclusion)
- 4- Polysemy