

Examining Seamus Heaney's Poem "A Herbal": A Corpus Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

This study aims at analyzing a selected poem "A Herbal" written by one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century; Seamus Heaney. The methodology is a corpus-based one. Using the tools of the computer to analyze and interpret poetry allows readers/ researchers to examine to what extent technology can bring the attention to crucial details that might be missed by human manual analysis. This does not imply that the later analysis should be neglected, but to emphasize employing both of the analyses to reach much more reliable results. In short, this study is qualitative and quantitative in nature.

This study has a great importance. There is an attempt to fill a gap in the area of analyzing poetry using corpus stylistics. As a matter of fact, few works are conducted by using corpus stylistics to examine poetry. The findings show how important to apply both quantitative and qualitative analyses to interpret and study literary texts. Relevantly, it can provide researchers with a better understanding of the themes, keywords, and the style of language. The obtained results have an objective trait. To put it differently, the data is examined by computational tools, here, WebCorp Live and Wmatrix, then the data is scrutinized in terms of manual study. In fact, this work demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary work, here humanities (linguistics) and computer studies. The results reflect the importance of using technology to study literary texts.

Keywords: corpus stylistics, quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Seamus Heaney, WebCorp Live, Wmatrix.

تحليل قصيدة شيمس هيني "عشبي" بطريقة المتن الاسلوبي

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المخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تحليل القصيدة المختارة "عشبي" لاحد اعظم الشعراء في القرن العشرين شيمس هيني. طريقة التحليل المستخدمة هي المدون الاسلوبي. طريقة استخدام النصوص المدونة او المحفوظة على هيئة نصوص مخزونة على الحاسوب تتيح استخدام ادوات الحاسوب لتحليل وتفسير الشعر مما تفسح للقراء والباحثين اختبار الى اي مدى التطور في التكنولوجيا يمكن ان يجلب الانتباه الى تفاصيل قد تهمل او تنسى باستخدام التحليل بدون استخدام الحاسوب. لهذه الدراسة اهمية بالغة حيث توجد محاولة لسد فراغ في مجال تحليل النصوص الشعرية باستخدام علم الاسلوب المدون. في واقع الامر، القليل من الكتابات تطرقت الى تحليل الشعر باستخدام علم الاسلوب المدون. اكدت النتائج على اهمية تطبيق التحليل الكمي والنوعي لتفسير ودراسة النصوص الادبية. عطا على ذلك، يساعد التحليل المدون على توفير فهم افضل للباحثين للحبكات السردية، مفاتيح الكلمات واسلوب اللغة للنص تتصف النتائج بسمة موضوعية، حيث تم تحليل النص باستخدام الاداتين WebCorp Live وWmatrix3. ومن ثم تم تحليل النص تحليل يدويا. توضح هذه الدراسة اهمية التداخل المعرفي بين علم اللغة والدراسات المتعلقة بادوات الحاسوب. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** المتن الاسلوبي، الطرق الكمية والنوعية، شيمس هيني، WebCorp, Wmatrix3

Introduction

Integrating the study of humanities, with computer studies dates back to the early 1940s. This achievement is established by the Italian priest Roberto Busa. He introduced a way of linguistic and literary analysis by using computers (Hammond, p. 83-84).

It is worth mentioning, that corpus-based tools help readers/researchers or anyone who has an interest in analyzing a target data (literary, non-literary) can make a great benefit from the technology in computational tools to check and examine the salient features of the language. As long as the data is saved as a soft text on a computer.

Corpus-based studies help to understand and interpret long texts in a short time and in a much efficient way in comparison to the manual qualitative analysis. As a matter of fact, this does not imply that researchers should neglect the latter type of analysis. Both modes quantitative and qualitative " they complement each other" (Jaafar, 2017, p. 42).

Due to the space constraints, here in this study, it is not the aim to replicate what is corpora and corpus stylistics. There is instead a focus on a methodology of how to analyze the chosen text by using corpus stylistics.

Related to this point, there are many significant works that discuss in details the introductory parts of corpus stylistics and corpus linguistics in general (see, for example, Semino and Short 2004; Mahlberg 2014; Jaafar, 2017).

Related Work

As a matter of fact, there are few studies applying corpus stylistics to analyze poetry.

McIntyre & Walker's (2010, p. 516-517) study aimed at analyzing William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Their main aim was to make a comparison in terms of semantic and lexical levels. This is done by using Wmatrix software (Rayson, 2008).

Brooke et al (2013) examined T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* by studying clusters (a group of words). This is achieved by using the tool SentiWordNet.

Brooke, Hammond & Hirst (2015) continue to analyze *The Waste Land* further by examining different voices and investigating their varied styles. This is achieved by applying one of the computational stylistics tools. Moreover, they explained

" Our work includes a model for stylistic segmentation that looks for points of a maximum stylistic variation, a k-means clustering model for detecting non-contiguous speech from the same voice, and a stylistic profiling approach which makes use of lexical resources built from a much larger collection of literary texts"(p.1).

Another study by Lutzky (2013) who worked on the poem; *Goblin Market* to understand the main themes, characters and the salient stylistic features of the poem. This information is obtained by employing WebCorp Live tool which is used in this study also.

Methodology

1-Preparing the corpus of the selected text.

2-Using WebCorp Live as the tool to examine n-grams (word clusters).

3-Employing Wmatrix3 software to benefit from its unique advantage of identifying key semantic domains. This can be achieved firstly by changing the text into plain text.

4-Following Ursula Lutzky (2013) steps in analyzing the poem 'Goblin Market' by using WebCorp, this work will use her work as a model to conduct the analysis.

Corpus Tools

There are many tools available for the sake of gaining a better and quick understanding of a selected data.

Mahlberg(2014) listed briefly the main corpus tools and their usage. Some of these include; WordSmith tool(Scott, 2012) is quite helpful to examine concordances, word lists and keywords lists. AntConc(Anthony, 2008) is a free software which can be easily uploaded to computer devices and can be beneficial in identifying what the previous tool can do. Furthermore, Wmatrix3 (Rayson, 2008) is another tool which is important in terms of analyzing key semantic domains(p. 387).

One more crucial tool is Sketch Engine (Lexical Computing Limited 2003) (<https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>) It's designed basically to locate word sketches, word lists, collocations and grammatical features.

4.1. WebCorp Live and Wmatrix3

WebCorp Live is a free web tool designed by Birmingham University for the main aim of analyzing the language of texts that can be found in online accessible links. This tool enables researchers to find information about a certain text by simply copying and pasting the text and with one click. Then, the results can be analyzed by manual qualitative analyses to support and polish the results (Literary Linguistics,n.d).

Wmatrix is a software tool used to conduct corpus stylistic studies, developed by Paul Rayson as part of his Ph.D. project. It is used to identify keywords, concordances, key semantic domains and other features. For more details about the usage and characteristics of this tool(see, Rayson, 2004 & Jaafar 2017).

The Selected Poem "A Herbal"

It is one of the poems of the collection "Human Chain" written in 2010 by Seamus Heaney and received the [Forward Poetry Prize](#) for the best collection award of the mentioned year.

This poem represents an adaptation or translation of the French poet Eugene Guillevic's poem "Herbier de Bretagne". "A Herbal" is a rather long poem consists of 19 short parts.

The Analysis

The title of the poem "A Herbal" has a missing grammatical element. The two elements the indefinite article and the word "herbal" require a noun to describe. The original title of the poem is "Herbier de Bretagne" which indicates to the herbs or plants of a specific place. Heaney shifted the idea from the definite to the indefinite. As if he wanted to refer to a herbal philosophy or theory that is not confirmed since there are many questions are posed and left with no answers.

The poem consists of 572 words, this number includes articles and prepositions that considered as functional words like (is , a, the, on, etc).

Using WebCorp Live helps to exclude these high-frequency words in order to give attention instead to content words (the carriers of the meaning). By filtering out the function words, the total number of content words is 207 words.

Keywords by WebCorp Live Screenshots(1) of the Retrieval of

dock	2
dead	2
bell	2
rat	2
sun	2
growth	2
leaves	2
now	2
different	2
earth	2
bracken	2
you've	2
clump	1
knew	1
flow	1
time	1
wildtrack	1

Word	Frequency
grass	5
wind	4
broom	4
place	3
roots	3
plants	3
back	3
world	3
even	3
tail	2
enemies	2
field	2
good	2

on **semantic tag cloud** and comparing the data(the poem) to **BNC Sampler Spoken**(corpora provided by Wmatrix), the following results appear:

Screenshot (2) Illustration of Key Semantic Domains

Key domain cloud



From the above screenshot, readers can notice that two domains (plants, the universe) are illustrated with a large font in comparison to other domains. This is to show that these two domains are more important and special attention needs to be given to them while analyzing the text. Similarly, other domains with a smaller font like (Dead, living-creatures, animals- birds, etc.) are also important and can give readers an idea of the main theme of the poem "A Herbal".

Screenshot (3) Wmatrix Retrieval Results of Word Cloud "Plants".

29 occurrences.			Ext
A Herbal	from Human chain (after Guillevi		1
Herbier de Bretagne) Everywhere	plants	Flourish among graves , Sinking t	2
ish among graves , Sinking their	roots	In all the dynasties Of the dead	3
es Of the dead . * Was graveyard	grass	In our place Any different ? Diff	4
? Different from ordinary Field	grass	? Remember how you wanted The sou	5
sh Compliant dialect No way have	plants	here Arrived at a settlement . No	6
o With the wind . * Not that the	grass	itself Ever rests in peace . It t	7
ind . Go with the flow . " * The	bracken	Is less boastful . It closes and	8
All day long . Which is why the	plants	, Even the bracken , Are sometime	9
ich is why the plants , Even the	bracken	, Are sometimes tempted Into trus	10
e hearse At walking pace Between	overgrown	verges , The dead here are borne	11
When the funeral bell tolls The	grass	is all a-tremble . But only then	12
e In the blackberries , A slatey	sap	. * Run your hand into The ditch	13
ditch back growth And youd grope	roots	, Thick and thin . But roots of w	14
ope roots , Thick and thin . But	roots	of what ? Once , one that we saw	15
why we never knew . Among them ,	Nettles	, Malignant things , letting on T	16
he vicious stings . * There were	leaves	on the trees And growth on the he	17
ngs . * There were leaves on the	trees	And growth on the headrigs You co	18
was better then Than to crush a	leaf	or a herb Between your palms Then	19
r then Than to crush a leaf or a	herb	Between your palms Then wave it s	20
Into the rat hole , Through the	vetch	and dock That mantled it . Becaus	21
On the quarry floor . * Between	heather	and marigold , Between sphagnum a	22
ry floor . * Between heather and	marigold	, Between sphagnum and buttercup	23
n heather and marigold , Between	sphagnum	and buttercup , Between dandelion	24
marigold , Between sphagnum and	buttercup	, Between dandelion and broom , B	25
sphagnum and buttercup , Between	dandelion	and broom , Between forget-me-not	26
room , Between forget-me-not and	honeysuckle	, As between clear blue and cloud	27
aystack and sunset sky , Between	oak tree	and slated roof , I had my existe	28
lf , like a nest Of crosshatched	grass	blades ?	29

The screenshot (3) clarifies the fact that the poet employs plants, including flowers to make his idea clear to the audience. In fact, the above retrieval results do not include all the names of plants. Plants like "broom" has five occurrences in the poem "forget-me-not" and mare's tail). In this way, the total occurrence of the name of plants is 32. These two words do not appear in the retrieval results for having other polysemous meanings.

The poet (the speaker) tries to understand to what extent plants in the graveyard are different from others in other ordinary places like gardens, fieldsthis inquiry perplexed the poet because the plants in the graveyard grow from the soil which is flourished from dead people "all the dynasties of the dead". Plants get their power and supplement from the soil. The pronoun "you" and the reference "your feet" is probably referring to the person accompanies the poet or the speaker at a certain occasion(Fawbert, 2011).

Moreover, the poem contains a series of rhetorical questions. These questions show the philosophical ideas of the poet, for example:

- "Was graveyard grass In our place Any different?"

- "Different from ordinary Field grass?"

- "Remember how you wanted Wildtrack of your feet Through the wet
At the foot of a field?"

- "See me?" it says. "The wind Has me well rehearsed
In the ways of the world.

- " Is there sun like here,"

- "And you'd grope roots, Thick and thin. But roots of what?"

- "What was better then..... And breathe?"

- "Where can it be found again,..... Where all is woven into And of itself, like a nest Of
crosshatched grass blades?"

I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me

(part 18)

These two lines have a great philosophical and a touching significance. The poet suggests that he had his existence in the world, once he lived the life and after death, he became part of the earth (soil) "me in place". Then his body would be the nourishment of plants like (heather, marigold, sphagnum, buttercup, dandelion, broom, forget-me-not, honeysuckle and many other plants that may grow. This is confirmed that the "place in me".

Another aspect related to the analysis is **key word clouds**. This is different from key semantic words in terms of the number of occurrences of the important words in the text. The image below illustrates the fact:

* a-tremble among as_between atlases bell between blackberries boastful borne bracken broom
 buttercup clump confess crosshatched crush dandelion dead disregarded ditch dock dynasties earth enemies fears field flourish forget-
 me-not gave_away go_with_the_flow grass graves graveyard grope growth Guillevics_Herbier_de have_to_do_with haystack headrags
 hearse herb herbal honeysuckle into its itself leaves letting_on look_into loop lush malignant mantled maps mares marigold me. nettles
 oak_tree overgrown palms plants quarry rat rehearsed rests roots sap secrets sings sinking slate slated slatey
 soothingly sound_recordist sphagnum stings sun sunlit sunset sunshine tail taken_in tarmac the tolls
 universe unstable verges vetch weathers whins wildtrack wind world woven youd youve

Screenshot (3) Wmatrix3 Retrieval Results of Key Word Cloud

The image shows the most frequent words in the text, for instance, the word "grass" has five occurrences which are demonstrated below:

1-"Was graveyard **grass** In our place Any different ?"

2-"Different from ordinary Field **grass**...)

3-"to do With the wind. * Not that the **grass** itself Ever rests in peace"

4-"When the funeral bell tolls The **grass** is all a-tremble . But only then..."

5-"itself , like a nest Of crosshatched **grass** blades?"

Conclusions and Recommendations

The researcher in this study tried to show how to conduct a corpus stylistic analysis to study and analyze a single poem by using two tools, namely; Wmatrix and WebCorp Live to reach to an objective interpretation of the poem.

What is concluded is the quantitative results support the manual qualitative stylistic analysis in terms of accurate occurrences of words, word numbers and in finding certain aspects that might be missed by ordinary human analysis, for example, to know the key semantic domains of the text. In addition to what is mentioned is to obtain the results quickly and accurately, especially when dealing with long texts.

One important point needs to be given attention here is the fact the retrieval results of names of the plants did not show all the names of planets as illustrated previously in the screenshot (2). This can be somehow misleading in terms of gaining accurate calculations. Thus, the manual analysis here plays a crucial role to support and complete the analysis.

What is recommended here is to study a collection of poems, for example, the whole collection of Seamus Heany *Human Chain* against large corpora, for example, the British National Corpus(BNC) or any other corpora.

In fact, researchers can benefit from the tools of the computer to study poetry. Thus, It is important to integrate the study of stylistic analysis with computer studies to achieve objectivity and reliability of the results.

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Appendix

“A Herbal” from Human chain
(after Guillevic’s “Herbier de Bretagne”)

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1-Everywhere plants
Flourish among graves,
Sinking their roots
* | In all the dynasties
Of the dead. |
| 2-Was graveyard grass
In our place
Any different?
Different from ordinary
Field grass?
Remember how you wanted
* | The sound recordist
To make a loop,
Wildtrack of your feet
Through the wet
At the foot of a field? |
| 3-Yet for all their lush
Compliant dialect
No way have plants here
Arrived at a settlement.
Not the mare’s tail,
* | Not the broom or whins.
It must have to do
With the wind. |
| 4-Not that the grass itself
Ever rests in peace.
It too takes issue,
* | Now sets a fire.
To the wind,
Now turns its back. |
| 5-"See me?" it says.
"The wind
Has me well rehearsed
In the ways of the world.
Unstable is good.
* | Permission granted!
Go, then, citizen
Of the wind.
Go with the flow." |
| 6-The bracken
Is less boastful.
It closes and curls back
* | On its secrets,
The best kept
Upon earth. |
| 7-And, to be fair,
There is sun as well.
Nowhere else
Is there sun like here,
Morning sunshine
* | All day long.
Which is why the plants,
Even the bracken,
Are sometimes tempted
Into trust. |
| 8-On sunlit tarmac,
On memories of the hearse
At walking pace
* | Between overgrown verges,
The dead here are borne
Towards the future. |
| 9-When the funeral bell tolls
The grass is all a-tremble.
But only then.
* | Not every time any old bell
Rings. |
| 10-Broom
Is like the disregarded | The effort.
And sometimes |

And company for them,
Shows them
They have to keep going,
That the whole thing's worth

*

11-Never, in later days,
Would fruit
So taste of earth.

*

12-Run your hand into
The ditch back growth
And you'd grope roots,
Thick and thin.
But roots of what?

*

13-We had enemies,
Though why we never knew.
Among them,

*

14-Enemies -
Part of a world
Nobody seemed able to explain
But that had to be

*

15-There were leaves on the trees
And growth on the headrigs
You could confess
Everything to.

*

16-What was better then
Than to crush a leaf or a herb
Between your palms

*

17-If you know a bit
About the universe
It's because you've taken it in
Like that,
Looked as hard
As you look into yourself,
Into the rat hole,

*

18- Between heather and marigold,
Between sphagnum and buttercup,
Between dandelion and broom,
Between forget-me-not and
honeysuckle,
As between clear blue and cloud,

19-Where can it be found again,
An elsewhere world, beyond
Maps and atlases

Like those same characters
When the weather's very good
Broom sings.

There was slate
In the blackberries,
A slatey sap.

Once, one that we saw
Gave itself away,
The tail of a rat
We killed.

Nettles,
Malignant things, letting on
To be asleep.

Put up with.
There would always be dock
leaves
To cure the vicious stings.

Even your fears
Of the night,
Of people
Even.

Then wave it slowly, soothingly
Past your mouth and nose
And breathe?

Through the vetch and dock
That mantled it.
Because you've laid your cheek
Against the rush clump
And known soft stone to break
On the quarry floor.

Between haystack and sunset sky,
Between oak tree and slated roof,
I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me.

Where all is woven into
And of itself, like a nest
Of crosshatched grass blades?