Corpus linguistics, systemic functional grammar and literary meaning: A critical analysis of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Andrew Goatly

Abstract

The research reported in this paper has two aims. First, to show how corpus linguistics, using word frequency and concordance data, which is then analysed according to transitivity systems of systemic functional grammar (SFG), can be useful to the enterprise of critical linguistics. Second, to investigate to what extent this critical corpus linguistics (CCL) gives a valid representation of the meanings and ideologies of a literary text. The hypothesis tested is that semiotic models of communication, in this case of popular children's literature, with their emphasis on the encoding and decoding of meanings, lend themselves to a corpus linguistics approach. But that, in fact, these mutually reinforcing approaches (SFG and CCL) with their reliance on what is encoded as text cannot entirely succeed in accounting for how literature, in particular, is understood and interpreted, and how ideology works within it and behind it. For a richer critical discourse analysis we need a pragmatic account, for example an analysis of presupposition, inference and propositional attitude. The issues here will be discussed in the light of recent debate between Michael Stubbs and Henry Widdowson on the strengths and limitations of corpus linguistics in critical discourse analysis.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis; systemic functional grammar; Harry

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