A CORPUS - AIDED STUDY OF LANGUAGE FEATURES OF 'THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST'

By

JIANG JUNMEI

Faculty of International Studies, Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, Henan, China.

ABSTRACT

Oscar Wilde is one of the most hilarious playwrights in the history of English literature. And 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is his masterpiece. With Wilde's humorous and witty language as the starting point and aided by the concordancing software WORDSMITH TOOLS, a detailed analysis was carried out on this comedy from lexical level and syntactical level, interesting and significant findings are found: 1) The comedy is about love and marriage. It mainly focuses on being earnest and is related with the behavior of bunbury. Besides their individuality, all characters have the nature of superficiality and hypocrisy. Each one treats the serious things such as death and religion with triviality, yet regards name and pleasure as things of vital importance. The main theme of the comedy is the duality of Victorian people, who are earnest and elegant in appearance, but superficial and absurd in nature, and who is wearing the mask of manners and telling lies whenever they like. Wilde holds a disapproving attitude against the society by frequently using the words of negative meaning or in the negative context. Some words give new meaning to describe the occurrence of things that cannot be controlled, but people act as if they could be, presenting characters' power in controlling things and other people. All the above statements are justified by lexical features of the text. 2) Wilde has an opposed and ironic attitude to the world he was living in. He knew the upper class, and he knew that the lives they led were so dry, boring, concerned with manners and customs, and so perfectly earnest that it was almost inhuman. Therefore, a lot of negatives appear in the text. High occurrences of negatives also show characters' ideas against convention and people's expectations.

Corpus-assisted literary analysis provides authentic contextual data that show meaningful information in the text and give students an immediate sense of the style of the text. Driven by objective data of linguistic features and the background language, students can see the foregrounding characteristics of a given text and its artistic values and consequently can appreciate the literary work better and have a deeper understanding of the language.

Keywords: Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, Corpus, Lexical Features, Syntactical Features.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the art of language. Language is the vehicle of literature. Literary language is the channel for the aesthetic function of a literary work. The men of letters use language as a tool to build images, characterize persons, and disclose literary themes and in this way reflect the social life and displays ideas and emotions. Therefore, language and literature have a natural alliance.

The rapid development of computer science and its application to language research makes it convenient to do text analysis. With the help of linguistic analysis software, literature study turns from the traditional armchair-based posture to the firmer empirical footing (Jenny, T. & Mick, S., 1996), that is, the research is given a firm hand from the objective statistics. Computer can help to retrieve data at an amazing speed and the output of the computer analysis can show directly the significant information about the aimed text.

The pleasure of reading Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is mainly due to the genius organization of the language, such as original lexical and syntactical

patterns. In the present study, corpus will be used to help the author to have an examination of its linguistic features and interpret the play's aesthetic value.

1. Literature Review

Oscar Wilde, an Irish-born humorist and playwright, is always shining in the history of English literature. He together with Shakespeare, Johnson, and Sheridan were regarded as the four peaks in the history of English drama (Chen, S., 1985). And it is generally agreed that 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is Wilde's masterpiece. Many critics and researchers have analyzed and appreciated the work from various angles. Eyre Methuen (Methuen, E, 1981) comments on Wilde's comic conventions that Wilde's concern with "brilliant surface" placed him within a recognizable English tradition. He asserts that in presenting society to society, with its heroes as those who were most accomplished, most elegant, and most successful in the "beau monde" and mocking interlopers of the vulgar world of commerce or the colonies, Wilde revived the spirit of late seventeenth century Restoration Comedy.

Robert Boyle (Boyle, R., 1985) describes Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' as a humorous "treatment of decay and death," and of "human suffering," in which Wilde finally abandons the effort to balance "conventional moral norms with the realities of human behavior".

Otto Reinert (Reinert, O., 2003, cited in http://www.victorianweb.org/ authors/wilde/pva240.html) in his Satiric Strategy in 'The Importance of Being Earnest' argues, "Wilde's basic formula for satire is (his characters') assumption of a code of behavior that represents the reality that Victorian convention pretends to ignore". He also claims that in this play Wilde is principally concerned with the difference between conventional and actual manners and morality.

Russell Jackson (Jackson, R., 2001, cited in Peter R) comments 'The Importance of Being Earnest' as the most famous and posthumously most successful play. He says that this comedy is different from the previous three in that some stereotypes and self-conscious decadence are notably absent in the fourth. At the same time he holds that Wilde's tactics are different from those of George Bernard Shaw: his paradox are not as confrontational and openly argumentative. His characters are ruthless in the pursuit of selfish goals and absurd ideals, not combative in the furtherance of the life-force or social justice. Critics and researchers in English-speaking countries have had a detailed and close treatment to Wilde's masterpiece. As a playwright that made a great contribution to the revival of British drama, he deserves an indisputable place in the history of English literature.

In China, Wilde's comedies are also appealing to readers as well as researchers. However, the achievements do not reach the fruit of a complete work, but scatter in various academic journals.

Xue Jiabao (Xue, J., 1994, 1995, 1996) writes a series of papers on the art of Wilde's comedies. He has a thorough study of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and sings high praise to Wilde's comedies and treats them as "jade in the treasure-house of British comedies".

Yuan Xia (Yuan, X., 1997), presents an article on Wilde's comedies from the perspective of aestheticism and claims that 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is the peak of Wilde's artistic achievement and the perfect embodiment of his idea of aestheticism.

He Xiaoping (He, X., 2010) writes an article on this comedy from the point view of feminism. She suggests that 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is a product of the age of the New Woman, since the women in the play is generally stronger and more resourceful than the men. For example, the female characters are the active manager and director of the process of proposal.

The previous researches have studied 'The Importance of Being Earnest' from different perspectives, but none of them is carried out with the help of corpora. So, based on the findings of the previous studies, the present study is designed to make full use of corpora to get some authentic data, so that the author can be helped to have an examination of the work's linguistic features and interpret the play's aesthetic value, at the same time, to check the claims made by literary critics.

2. Research Design

2.1 Corpora used in the Study

This is a corpus-assisted study, both quantitive and qualitive

in nature, so that the analysis will not fail in mechanism and impressionism. The corpora used are the text of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and British National Corpus (BNC).

The British National Corpus (BNC) is a 100 million collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of current British English, both spoken and written (Kennedy, G., 2000). The corpus is designed to represent as a wide range of modern British English as possible. The written part (90%) includes, extracts from regional and national newspapers, specialist periodicals and journals for all ages and interests, academic books and popular fiction, published and unpublished letters and memoranda, school and university essays, among many other kinds of text.

The BNC, as standard representative samples of English language, is used to establish norms of frequency and usage against which individual texts can be measured, forming the particular valuable basis for comparison between texts and a corpus (Susan, H., 2002). By comparing Wilde's language with BNC, it is hoped that the characteristic features of his writing will be found.

2.2 Research Objective and Questions

The objective of the study is the linguistic features of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and their significance, in a belief that only by paying attention to the origin of a literature, namely language rather than the factors outside, can one find the real beauty of Wilde's work. Specifically, the research questions examined in the study are:

- Is there any relevance between keywords and the theme, plot, characterization, conflict of the comedy 'The Importance of Being Earnest?'

- Is there any relevance between author's diction, syntactical preference and its aesthetic significance?

2.3 Research Procedure

The study goes through three steps.

Step 1: Retrieve keywords and analyse the plot. The starting-point is the study of a text as opposed to the study of a whole language. Therefore, Wordsmith tools (5.0) are used, which enable the user to identify and study patterns in texts that are not easily found otherwise. The main tools are Word list, Keywords, and Concord. Wordlist tool can generate word lists which are shown both in alphabetical and frequency order. The purpose of the program Keywords is to locate and identify keywords in a given text. Any word that is found to be outstanding in its frequency in the text is considered "key". The keywords are presented in order of outstandingness. By plotting the distribution of keywords, it can be seen how certain words relate to others, where each keyword occurs and how many links there are between keywords. The point of it is to see where the keywords are distributed within the text. The plot will give useful visual insights into how often and where the different keywords crop up in the text. Concord is a program to be used to specify a search word. It will then present a concordance display, and give you access to information about collocates of the search word.

Step 2: Describe the linguistic features systematically. In this study, linguistic features are grouped into multilevel categories. Lexical features are data mainly from the keywords database, and are divided into plot-related, characterization-related, theme-related, and abnormal usage groups. Syntactical data are from wordlist and the keyword tool as well only fewer in quantity for the limitation of the software.

Step 3: Demonstrate the aesthetic functions of the linguistic features. The ultimate aim of this research is to relate the objective linguistic data with reference to plot, theme, characterization, and style. Demonstration of the aesthetic functions is the last yet not the least important step for a literary stylistic analysis. The whole significance of the research lies in the presentation of the aesthetic value of the language. The three stages of analysis are interlaced with one another.

3. Findings and Discussion

'The Importance of Being Earnest' is Wilde's extraordinary parody of the "trivial comedies" which the "serious people" had established in English theater. It has been called "a world of delightful make-believe". Every sentence in this play is highly organized and elaborately planned. The artificiality of Wilde's style mirrors the sophisticated society in which he lived. His sense of structure is splendidly theatrical.

The language and its resonance arrest the attention of the audience and compel them to laugh, and there is a rising curve of dramatic tension throughout.

3.1 Lexical Features

The basic assumption is that there is a relation between word frequencies and the theme of the text. Keywords are divided into the following categories: the vocabulary related with plot and theme, the vocabulary showing main characters and their relationship, words with abnormal usage.

3.1.1 Plot Analysis: Love and Marriage

Table 1 shows part of concordancing lines by searching the core word "Ernest" and the selected concordancing lines

1	isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest. JACK. It isn't **Ernest**; it's Jack. ALGERNON. You have
2	ERNON. You have always told me it was **Ernest**. I have introduced you to every one a
3	of Ernest. You look as if your name was **Ernest**. You are the most earnest-looking
4	in his pocket. JACK. Well, my name is **Ernest** in town and Jack in the country, and
5	to have a younger brother of the name of **Ernest**, who lives in the Albany, and gets I
6	vented a very useful younger brother called **Ernest**, in order that you may be able to
7	it is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of **Ernest**. And I strongly advise you to do the
8	mentioned to me that he had a friend called **Ernest**, I knew I was destined to love you.
9	that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't **Ernest?** GWENDOLEN. But your name is
10	nt's solitude. The only really safe name is **Ernest** JACK. Gwendolen, I must get christ
11	ther, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin **Ernest**. ALGERNON. Oh! I am not really
12	foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, **Ernest**. ALGERNON. Darling! And when wa
13	ays been to love some one of the name of **Ernest**. There is something in that name that
14	of mine to love some one whose name was **Ernest**. ALGERNON rises, CECILY also.
15	I naturally will take the name of **Ernest**. Gwendolen would wish it.
16	We can't both be christened **Ernest**. It's absurd. Besides, I have a perfect
17	Is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is **Ernest**. LADY BRACKNELL. Yes, I remem
18	Always told you, Gwendolen, my name was **Ernest**, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest after all. I

Table 1. Concordancing Lines of "Ernest"

of "Ernest" suggest the main plot of this comedy.

Lines 1-6 disclose that JACK Worthing, who lives in the COUNTRY, pretends to have a younger brother, EARNEST, whose escapades frequently call Jack to London. Algernon pretends to have an INVALID friend, BUNBURY, whose attacks call Algernon into the COUNTRY whenever there is a distasteful social responsibility in prospect. This activity Algernon refers to as "BUNBURING."

Lines 8-14 represent the LOVE story between two GIRLS and the incident around the NAME of "ERNEST". Gwendolyn loves Jack as "Ernest Worthing", confessing she has always felt that a man named "Ernest" was her fate. Cecily, who is agreeably surprised at the appearance of Algernon in the guise of the much-discussed "Ernest", declares she has been deeply in love with him for a year and has made entries in her DIARY detailing the courtship. The young couple loses no time in becoming ENGAGED for, Cecily admits, the name "Ernest" has always fascinated her.

Lines 15-18 provide hints to the event that Jack and Algernon are separately arranging with the rector for a re-CHRISTENING. The discovery of Gwendolyn and Cecily that they both seem to be ENGAGED to "Ernest Worthing" results in a strained situation. The appearance of both young men clarifies the matter of ENGAGEMENTS, but also reveals that neither is named "Ernest." The story ends with the identification of Jack Worthing as Algernon's lost elder brother, Ernest, thus settling matters to everyone's satisfaction.

The story can be seen in detail by analyzing the keywords table (Table 2). Dividing them into groups as "name", "marriage", "setting", and "food" according to the semantics and referring to our impression of reading the text, interesting and meaningful findings are self-evident.

From Table 2 which shows the keywords of the comedy, some details of the story can be verified: First, the whole story develops around the NAME of ERNEST and the behavior of BUNBURY, which are essential to the introduction, complication, and resolution of the whole story. The background is set in TOWN at first and COUNTRY in the end. ROOM is related with TOWN, while GARDEN is related with COUNTRY. These settings are not only locative, but also provide the atmosphere that all the characters

Sl. No	Name-Related Words	Freq.	Marriage-Related Words	Freq.	Setting-Related Words	Freq.	Food-Related Words	Freq.
1	Ernest	82	Engaged	20	Country	14	Muffin(s)	18
2	Name	55	Married	29	Town	12	Tea	18
3	Bunbury (ING)	44	Engagement	10	Afternoon	16	Cake	10
4	Bunburist	9	Marry	10	Moment	20	Cucumber (s)	8
5	Christenings	5	Love	23	Cloak	5	Butter	9
6	Christened	17	Fond	6	Room	25	Sandwiches	5
7	Bag	17	Kisses	6	Sofa	6	Salver	5
8	-	-	Ask	18	Garden	13	Dine	8
9	-	-	Propose	8	Woolton	3	-	-
10	-	-	Consent	8	Belgrave	3	-	-
11	-	-	Hand	33	Shropshire	5	-	-
12	-	-	Girl	18	-	-	-	-
13	-	-	Diary	14	-	-	-	-
14	-	-	Pleasure	14	-	-	-	-

Table 2. Plot-loaded Words

exist and move, which are highly relevant to the theme and provide ironic contrast to the characters. Town implies the superficial civilized society of upper class, while country represents the real inner world hiding under the surface. Just as Karl Beckson (Beckson, K., 1998) says, the underlying tension of the play depends upon "the contrast of city and country so important to the double lives being led".

There is a lot of stuff in the ROOM including SOFA and all kinds of food. The SOFA is the symbol of the center of the leisure class' idleness-- a comfortable place to while away the afternoon without work. The CUCUMBER SANDWICHES also become a symbol for the hedonism of the rich. To DINE is a frequent topic discussed in the ROOM. For readers, it is easy to imagine the fashionable images in the dramatic world of this play, at-homes, dinner parties, and country-house weekends.

Second, it is implied by such words as ENGAGED, MARRIED, LOVE, PROPOSE, CONSENT that the topic of this comedy is love and marriage, with its manners and obstacles. However, the characters' views of marriage in this comedy are amazing and they are a source of laughter and an issue for "serious" discussion. The above judgment can be supported by Table 3 which shows some of the keywords and concordancing results of the relevant keywords.

In this comedy, guardians' assent is required for marriage. When Jack wishes to marry Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell disapproves, so Jack refuses to allow Algernon to marry Cecily. The trivialization of the divine institution of marriage shows Wilde saw it as the practice surrounded by absurdity and hypocrisy. In addition, both Gwendolyn and Cecily are sure that they could not possibly love someone whose name was not Earnest, which both Algernon and Jack are not. However, for the characters, it is much more important for them to be called Ernest than to be really earnest. Their ideal is merely focused on "name", a meaningless label, so when two heroes promise to be "re-christened", they are forgiven immediately and the play ends happily. In this point, the institution of marriage is sharply satirized, and the superficiality of the characters is vividly portrayed.

3.1.2 Character Analysis: Superficiality and Absurdity

The characters in the play are paired. By analyzing the conversation of each pair, examining how they speak, what sorts of epigrams or social commentaries they make, what they assume of the other person, and what their primary interests are, the following conclusion can be drawn. 1) The four lovers are witty, elegant, polished, self-possessed, as is judging from their personality and their

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1   it has always been my ideal to **love** someone by the name of Earnest.

2   that was the result of the Indian climate, and **marriage,** and indigestion, and other things of that kind.

3   It would hardly have been a really serious **engagement** if it hadn't been broken off at least once

Table 3. Topic-Related Concordancing Lines

manners, hates or values in developing the dialogues. 2) Lady Bracknell is the prototypical London aristocrat. She is stuffy, arrogant and only too eager to prevent her daughter from marrying poorly, and erupts into the play with development of words and as original and disconcerting as her attitudes, whose style of speech has an extraordinary quality of unpredictability, which stems partly from the shape of her sentences and partly from the sequence of her thinking logic.

Besides all the distinctions, there is one thing common among the characters that none of them have any inkling that they are speaking absurdities. All believe their word and behaviors to be sincerely serious and true. Even the self-indulgent Algernon is earnest in his self-indulgence.

It can be seen from Table 4 that the top keywords on the whole list of words are the names of the main characters of this play, since their names are always before the words they say in dialogue form. And so is their interrelationship often mentioned in the text. There are three major male-female relationships in this play: ALGERNON-CECILY, JACK-GWENDOLEN, PRISIM-CHASUBLE. Besides, their inter-relationships are GUARDIAN-WARD, AUNT/UNCLE-NEPHEW, BROTHER and COUSIN.

What actually happens among them is that two male friends (in fact, BROTHERS) ALGERNON and JACK discover that each of them has a "fake" friend they use to escape people. Their problems are complicated though when they each use the same fake name and two girls CECILY (JACK's WARD) and GWENDOLEN (ALGERNON's COUSIN) each fall in love with "Ernest." These girls eventually discover that their boyfriends are not the same person, and that these men are not "earnest," but are lying about their true identities. All ends well though when one of the men JACK discovers that his true name really is "Ernest", and happens to have a brother ALGERNON.

Each character conveys an exaggerated reflection of the qualities of people during Wilde's time. They are representatives of Victorian snobs, who are arrogant, overly proper, formal, and concerned with money. Lying is easy for them. The main concern of all the characters in the play is something that Wilde viewed as rather trivial: marriage. One view among critics is that Wilde is saying through 'The Importance of Being Earnest' that marriage based on class by birthright is no less stupid that marriage based on something else that a baby cannot control, i.e. his name.

3.1.3 Thematic Analysis: Earnestness in Triviality

Wilde has described his play as about characters who trivialize serious matters and solemnize trivial matters. All the information embodied in the dialogues among characters exposes the empty, trivial lives of the aristocracy. Algernon is the greatest example of a hedonist who likes nothing better than to eat, frolic, and gossip without consequence. These conditions can be seen in the way that Algernon is astonished by the absence of CUCUMBER SANDWICHES, or by the serious class conflicts that are quickly smoothed over by wit. The luxurious living condition also represents Wilde's viewpoint of Aestheticism, which advocate the uselessness of beauty and art. Therefore, in fact, Algernon's idleness is not merely laziness, but the product of someone who has cultivated an esteemed sense of aesthetic uselessness.

The keywords retrieval shows that the theme of the comedy is about people's attitude towards the trivial and important things in life and the sequence of such attitude can be very out of expectation. Just as Wilde himself suggests that people should treat trivial matters with greater respect and pay less attention to what society regarded as serious. Table 5 highlights the concordancing lines of "serious" which show that in this comedy, the most frequent

Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
Algernon	269	Brother	52
Cecily	256	Aunt	36
Gwendolen	177	Uncle	26
Jack	287	Guardian	12
Bracknell	125	Cousin	11
Prism	84	Ward	8
Chasuble	63	Nephew	6

Table 4. Character-loaded Words

1 well, one must be **serious** about something, if one wants to have any
2 chooses. Every **serious** Bunburyist knows that. JACK.
3 would hardly have been a really **serious** engagement if it hadn't been broken
4 out it. I hate people who are not **serious** about meals. It is so shallow of them.
5 I happen to be **serious** about Bunburying. What on earth y
6 are the only things that are never **serious**. JACK. Oh, that's nonsense,
7 Sometimes he is so **serious** that I think he cannot be quite well
8 I hate people who are not **serious** about meals.

Table 5. Concordancing Lines of "Serious"

collocation of "serious (about)" are trivial matters like MEAL or BUNBURY. These illogical and pointless things are like threads pulled throughout the entire play, which emphasizes the idea that people of Wilde's time, like Algernon, had strong interest in pointless subjects.

The word "NAME" is highly relevant to the plot as well as the theme of the play. Collocating with ERNEST 18 times and with Christian 5 times it indicates characters' attitude towards trivial things such as one's name and the serious things such as religion or baptism, which is also a reflection of superficiality.

Table 6 is the concordancing lines of name from which clearly show that words before "NAME" are highly descriptive. "NAME" can be divided into good and bad, or even divine and absurd. It also has many effects such as music and inspiration and even love. While in contrast, religious ceremony such as christen is thought to be non-painstaking and could have been done as frequent as they like.

The subtitle of the play is 'A Trivial Comedy for Serious People'. In this play, besides name other superficial or trivial things, such as expression, food, pleasure are all considered serious by the characters. And things like religion, death, customs and manners, etc. get trivialized. As Wilde's explanation goes,

"I hope you will enjoy my 'trivial' play. It is written by a butterfly for butterflies. (The play) has its philosophy . . . that we should treat all the trivial things seriously, and the serious things in life with sincere and studied triviality."

Earnestness - that is, a high-minded and serious devotion to duty and virtue - was a quality advocated by some Victorians, but it was mocked as a trait of the rigidly moralistic middle class by Wilde, who found upper class values self-serving and tastes dull. In this satire, being earnest is made as superficial a trait as possible; it means simply having the NAME, ERNEST. The characters are motivated and controlled by a hollow and artificial set of social standards that have little substance, but are used to maintain social distinctions and social class privileges.

3.1.4 Semantic Deviation: Idiosyncrasy of Words

The first term which comes to mind when thinking of vocabulary and style is diction or choice of words. Wilde's use of vocabulary which are idiosyncratic will be identified, and an explanation for the particular choices made by the writer will be provided.

Comparing with BNC, some words are shown to be favorites with Wilde in the comedy of 'The Importance of Being Earnest', 1) Adjectives are frequently of negative meaning, or used in negative context, such as HEARTLESS, HORRID, UNFORTUNATE, WICKED, VULGAR, and ABSURD. 2) Most frequent adverbs are used to describe negative quality, especially some which tend to used as positive modifiers. Table 7 shows part of the concordancing lines of the adverb "perfectly", it can be seen clearly from Table 7 that the word "perfectly" are frequently seen in negative context.

The normal meaning of "perfectly" is "in a perfect manner or to a perfect degree," which implies the soundness and the excellence of every part, element, or quality of a thing,

1	alid friend who has the absurd **name.** ALGERNON. Nothin
2	ng hands. What a very sweet **name!** Something tells me that
3	fact, it is rather an aristocratic **name.** Half of the chaps who g
4	ack, for instance, a charming **name.** GWENDOLEN. Jac
5	y brother. Under an assumed **name** he drank, I've just been in
6	lgernon. It is not at all a bad **name.** In fact, it is rather an ari
7	es of my nature. Your Christian **name** has an irresistible fascin
8	units you perfectly. It is a divine **name.** It has a music of its o
9	solitude. The only really safe **name** is Ernest JACK. Gw
10	est. There is something in that **name** that inspires absolute confidence
11	ee of Ernest... I don't think the **name** suits me at all.
12	been to love some one of the **name** of Ernest. There is some
13	decision on the subject of my **name** is irrevocable, I suppose?

Table 6. Concordancing Lines of "Name"

1	-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is **perfectly** absurd your saying that your
2	t anything else. It is enough to drive one **perfectly** frantic. ALGERNON. Of
3	Well, I don't like your clothes. You look **perfectly** ridiculous in them. Why on e
4	es up the Wedding March. Jack looks **perfectly** furious, and goes to the door.
5	ly way to eat them. JACK. I say it's **perfectly** heartless of your eating muffins at
6	arth don't you go up and change? It is **perfectly** childish to be in deep mourning
7	ndon who flirt with their own husbands is **perfectly** scandalous. It looks so bad.
8	ow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is **perfectly** disgraceful. It is almost as bad
9	s in your part of Shropshire? JACK. **Perfectly** horrid! Never speak to on

Table 7. Concordancing Lines of "Perfectly"

frequently as an unattainable or theoretical state (1992, p. 284, cited from Merriam-webster), and usually used in positive context. While from the collocation it can be seen that it is most frequent in modifying unpleasant emotional state. That suggests in this play some social conventions are criticized and the characters often hold views contrary to the normally accepted cultural values. 3) Many words in the play are employed in unusual context which present occurrence of things that cannot be controlled, but people act as if they could be. Table 8 shows some of the words which are employed in unusual context.

The idea of reform as something that can be carried out in an afternoon is laughed at, and the value of reform itself: to reform is to conform is also laughed at. It can be known from Table 8 that Algernon wants to be reformed himself within one afternoon, here, Algernon's frivolous attitude towards reform is an ironical reflection of the leisured Victorian society in which everything can be argued, but nothing can be resolved. This humorous dialogue not only brings the audience into laughter, but also makes them aware of certain features of their society, in which people boast of their eagerness to bring about social reforms, but actually try to conform to old conventions.

All such deviations in vocabulary reflect that Oscar Wilde's satire was aimed against the aristocracy, a class on the brink of ruin, clinging absurdly to its artificial forms and standards. The tone is brightly serious; the witty word play reveals the disparity between the artificial social customs of English aristocratic society and this group's mercenary values, as well as shallow family relationships. Everything is evaluated according to its style, its conformity to fashion rather than the nature or significance. All shows Wilde's

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1   Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is surely a matter that an aunt may be allowed to *decide* for herself.

2   But I think it is high time that Mr Bunbury *made up his mind* whether he was to live or die.

3   I should be much obliged I you would ask Mr Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday,

4   I can *promise* you he'll be all right by Saturday.

5   ALGERNON. …that's why I want you to *reform* me. CECILY. I'm afraid I have no time, this afternoon.

6   Health is the primary *duty* of life.

7   To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a *contempt* for the ordinary decencies of family life that remind

Table 8. Concordancing Lines of Words Employed
in Unusual Context

queer thinking and unique art craft.

3.2 Syntactical Feature

Most sentences in this play are commonly used in English patterns, since the dialogues win through the amazing playing with words and word meaning. However, a noticing syntactical feature of this comedy is the number and position of negatives. It can be seen from Table 9 that not only is the word "NOT" repeated, but there are also words and phrases appearing throughout the text, such as DON'T, ISN'T, WON'T, CAN'T, CANNOT, HAVEN'T, COULDN'T, NEVER, DIDN'T, SHOULDN'T, WOULDN'T, NONSENSE, HARDLY, DOESN'T.

The main reasons for this feature are 1) characters in this play frequently say against others' opinions; 2) viewpoints of the characters are against the social conventions.

Reinert argues that in this play Wilde is principally concerned with the difference between conventional and actual manners and morality - "Wilde's basic formula for satire is (his characters') assumption of a code of behavior that represents the reality that Victorian convention pretends to ignore". Numerous "not" indicates the inverted ideas that are abnormal in reality and normal among the characters. Wilde speaks through the characters his sneer at the hypocrisy of marriage and its mercenary nature.

The word "Not" represents a kind of inharmoniousness. With its frequent striking to the ears, the audiences laugh and learn and get a new perspective to understand things. Through the negatives, characters get reversed. The innocent country maiden sounds more sophisticated than the jade man-about-town.

Conclusion

Major Findings

This paper argues that the use of corpus in the analysis of a literary work is motivating and rewarding. With detailed study of the language in Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' the following findings can be got:

• The comedy is about love and marriage, around the

Don't	77	Didn't	6	Cannot	11	Hardly	17	Can't	12
Isn't	17	Shouldn't	4	Haven't	10	Doesn't	3	Nonsense	10
Won't	14	Wouldn't	5	Couldn't	10	Not	146	Never	56

Table 9. Negatives

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name of Ernest and related with the behavior of bunbury. Characters match with each other and all have the nature of superficiality and hypocrisy. Each one treats the serious things such as death and religion with triviality, yet regards name and pleasure as things of importance. The main theme of the comedy is the duality of Victorian people, who are earnest and elegant in appearance and selfish and absurd in nature, and who are wearing the mask of manner and telling lies as much as they like. All the above statements are justified from lexical features of the text. Keywords and plot distribution highly relevant to the plot, characterization, theme of the comedy.

- Wilde holds a disapproving attitude against the society by frequently using the words of negativity or in the negative context. Some words give new meaning to describe the occurrence of things that cannot be controlled, but people act as if they could be. All the lexical features are showing Wilde's ironic attitude to the world he was living.

By looking at Wilde's use of language in 'The Importance of Being Earnest', it is obvious that he believed people hid their trivial lifestyles by creating an earnest image for themselves, and leading double lives. This strong opinion can be seen primarily through the character's hypocritical, superficial, and absurd mannerisms, creating an exaggerated mirror image of what he believed society to be. The characters' absurd, flamboyant, and pretentious qualities are put forward through the nonsensical, yet elegantly spoken things they say, their outrageous behaviors and the absurd complexities that arouse. Each character conveys an exaggerated reflection of the qualities of people during Wilde's time, whose individual voice, tone, manner, and attitude are portrayed through Wilde's use of language.

Implication and Limitation

The aim of this paper was to present the new way in which concordancing programs could be used in a stylistic approach to literature. After the corpus- assisted stylistic analysis on this comedy we believe concordancing software is an efficient means to do literary analysis. It provides the authentic contextual data that show

meaningful information to the text and give students basic insights into the structure of literary writing as well as an immediate sense of the style of the text. Driven by objective data of linguistic features and their relationship with language as a whole, students can see the foregrounding characteristics of a given text and its artistic values so that they can have a motivation for reading, raise language awareness, appreciate the literary work better and enhance linguistic and stylistic competence.

As no research is ever definitive or exhaustive, this one is still open. The selected features in the present analysis have been those of high frequency and salience to the writer, but one should be aware all the time that the observations have been subjective and therefore are bound to be incomplete, as some important features may not occur that often. In one word, there still is room for more detailed study, since no critics can exhaust a literary work's value.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jiang Junmei is currently working in Faculty of International Studies, Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, China. She obtained her Master's Degree from Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, China. Her research field is in Corpus Linguistics and English Teaching.