

Foreword

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.18.foreword>

Pages xiii–xiv of

**A Corpus Linguistic Approach to Literary Language and
Characterization: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves***

Giuseppina Balossi

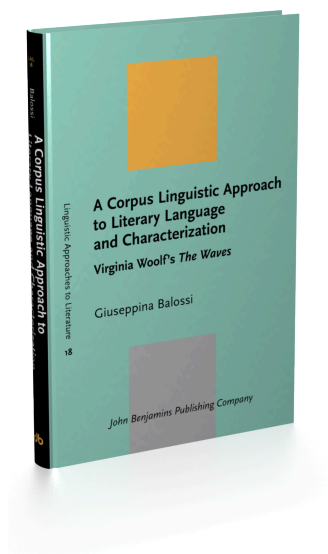
[*Linguistic Approaches to Literature*, 18]

2014. xxi, 277 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

For further information, please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website at benjamins.com/rights



Foreword

“Language use is one of the most mysterious products of the human mind, and literature is probably the most enigmatic form of language use” (van Peer 2011: 1). Before the arrival of structuralism, the study of literature tended to be based on free, intuitive interpretation. Today, with the advent of the computer, more systematic studies can be carried out. Will they offer possibilities for solving the enigma of language in literature?

While computer-assisted methods of enquiry have been familiar for some time now across a range of disciplines, such as psychology and other social sciences (Murphy 2010; Pennebaker 2011), the field of literary criticism has resisted the lure of the computer (Gottschall 2008). Corns (1991: 129) observed that computer-aided literary analyses were not being paid sufficient attention and unfairly associated with poor achievements, whereas stylometric studies (Burrows 1987) formed a distinct strand kept quite separate from the main literary critical tradition. Louw (1993: 152–176; 1997: 240–251) was one of the first scholars to appreciate the potential value and effectiveness of corpus linguistics in the analysis of literary texts. Now computer-aided studies have been accepted as a major research paradigm (Stockwell 2008: 351–363) that can contribute a great deal to developing fresh critical insights into the stylistic qualities of texts, including literary ones (Deignan 2005; Zyngier 2008: 169–190; Lüdeling and Kytö 2008; 2009; Starcke 2010; Viana *et al.* 2011).

While we may all agree that the computer will never be able to understand and appreciate a literary text in the ways the human mind does (Graesser *et al.* 2011: 24–33), we must acknowledge that corpus methodologies open up, in Leech’s words (1992: 106), “a new way of thinking about language.” Using the computer leads to discoveries that cannot be seen with the naked eye. A computer-aided approach can also offer new starting points for investigation. It has proven to be a strong research method anchored firmly in theoretical frameworks which can be combined with other qualitative methodologies (Leech and Fligelstone 1992: 115–140; Biber *et al.* 1998; Biber 2011: 15–23; Mahlberg and McIntyre 2011: 204–227; McIntyre 2012: 409–415).

This book attempts to demonstrate how a computer-aided approach can guide us through the investigation of language and characterization in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931). The focus is on whether characters can be differentiated

through examining the word-classes and semantic categories associated with them. Although these corpus-based findings may sometimes be problematic, it is argued that they produce new and detailed insights into both the diachronic development of the characters and the novel as a whole. While the investigation of the word classes conducted to assess the presence of individuality in the characters' voices or idiolects (Stewart 2003: 129–138) is purely quantitative, the semantic analysis is more finely articulated. By applying Culpeper's (2001) cognitive model of characterization, the semantic fields distinguishing each character to a statistically significant extent are also subjected to qualitative analysis, allowing inferences to be drawn about probable differences in personality traits and idiosyncratic mind styles (Fowler 1977: 103–113; Semino 2007: 153–203).

The book is conceived in such a way as to bring both theory and practice together. Background information is provided on the theoretical aspects of the debate over characterization in *The Waves*, followed by a broad survey of studies of characterization from their outset to the present state of the art, and of proposals for viable ways to study fictional people's language and their personalities (Eder *et al.* 2010). The study also provides and puts into practice a detailed methodology for the analysis of character. The corpus-based approach, as suggested here, is also a methodology applicable to the contrastive investigation of language, and of language and personality, in different types of discourses encompassing both fictional *personae* and real people.